

Vladimir and Estragon in Skopje

**A fictional conversation on trust and standards
And a plea on how to break a vicious circle**

17 July 2014



There is no past, no future, just an endlessly repeating present. Characters are imprisoned in a single place, unable to leave. They inhabit a universe filled with futile dialogue and futile gestures. People are lost. We are on the set of *Waiting for Godot*. We are in the world of EU-Macedonian relations in 2014. Is this the future of European enlargement policy throughout South East Europe?

ESTRAGON: Don't let's do anything. It's safer.
 VLADIMIR: Let's wait and see what he says.
 ESTRAGON: Who?
 VLADIMIR: Godot.
 ESTRAGON: Good idea.
 VLADIMIR: Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand.

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STAIRWAY TO NOWHERE?

“Nothing to be done.”

“I’m beginning to come round to that opinion.
All my life I’ve tried to put it from me, saying,
Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven’t yet tried everything.”
Waiting for Godot



The process of European enlargement faces a serious and deepening crisis. Trust in enlargement policy is declining everywhere: in EU member states, in candidate countries, among those who govern and those in opposition.

At the heart of the current crisis of enlargement is an erosion of belief in the central premises of the pre-accession process: that it is a powerful tool for transformation, capable of accelerating reforms in candidate countries so they become fit for accession in the foreseeable future; and that enlargement is a win-win policy, good for both the current EU members and those who aspire to join.

Public opinion in EU member states has moved far in the past five years, and always in one direction: deepening opposition to enlargement in every single EU member state, old and new, rich and poor, those hit hard by the global economic crisis and those relatively unscathed. Enlargement has never been less popular in the EU than now. A recent Eurobarometer survey shows that an absolute majority of EU citizens oppose further enlargement (52 per cent). Opposition is even stronger among euro area respondents (60 per cent).¹

This collapse in support for enlargement is a recent development. In spring 2008, more than half of the public opposed enlargement in just four of the twenty-seven member states; by autumn 2013, that threshold had been passed in twelve member states. The fall in support for enlargement is sharpest in traditionally pro-enlargement countries such as Italy (where opposition to enlargement increased by 22 percentage points) or Spain (21). Post-2004 EU

¹ European Commission, [Standard Eurobarometer 69](#) (Spring 2008) and [Standard Eurobarometer 80](#) (Autumn 2013).

members, which initially were much less sceptical, are rapidly catching up with pre-2004 members. The changes in Cyprus, the Czech Republic and Slovakia are dramatic.

Where opposition has increased most since 2008

Country	Spring 2008 (%)	Autumn 2013 (%)	Change
Cyprus	23	56	+33
Czech Republic	26	50	+24
Italy	37	59	+22
Spain	16	37	+21
Slovakia	21	42	+21
Slovenia	21	42	+21
Netherlands	46	64	+18
Portugal	31	49	+18
Estonia	25	40	+15
Ireland	31	46	+15

Opposition to enlargement: 50 percent or more

Country	Autumn 2013 (%)
Austria	76
France	70
Germany	69
Finland	65
Luxembourg	64
Netherlands	64
Belgium	62
Italy	59
Cyprus	56
United Kingdom	55
Denmark	51
Greece	51
Czech Republic	50

Where opposition to enlargement is still below 30 percent

Country	Spring 2008 (%)	Autumn 2013 (%)	Change
Poland	12	26	+14
Malta	15	25	+10
Lithuania	16	20	+4
Romania	8	18	+10

Such a collapse of popular support is bound to have consequences. Elite opinion across the EU is beginning to catch up to public opinion when it comes to scepticism. There is also a perception in many EU capitals that the quality of democratic governance is in fact deteriorating in a number of countries, whether they are negotiating (Turkey), or candidates (Macedonia) or potential candidates (Bosnia). This has radical implications: if already troubled countries with polarised politics are regressing, will the promise of the overall accession process ever lead to success?

In the face of growing public opposition, many among the EU's elites – opinion leaders and politicians – have given up defending the enlargement policy. Seen from Brussels, Berlin,

Paris or The Hague, the current group of candidates looks problematic. They are poorer, have weaker institutions, have more dysfunctional economies and are more politically polarised than any previous group of applicants. As one senior diplomat told ESI recently, “Opposition to enlargement is really about this group of candidates. There would be no enlargement fatigue if Norway or Switzerland would apply to join the EU.” This is not enlargement “fatigue”, suggesting a temporary state of exhaustion. It is a chronic ailment, which is getting worse.

All this has created a vicious circle. As enlargement loses popularity in EU member states, EU leaders try to reassure their voters that the process is stricter than ever. Yet as the hurdles to be jumped appear more and more arbitrary, candidate countries find it harder to take difficult decisions in pursuit of a goal that is increasingly distant and uncertain. Today it is Moldovans (in 2009) and Ukrainians (in 2013), countries without a concrete enlargement perspective, who waved the EU flag when they took to the streets to protest. When Turks (in 2013) or Bosnians (in 2014) protested, there were no EU flags on display.

A combination of bilateral vetoes and hesitations has already brought the formal accession process to a snail’s pace. Turkey has been negotiating since 2005 and has not yet opened even half its chapters. Macedonia is a candidate since 2005 and has not yet been given a date even to open talks. Albania became a candidate this year, but has been warned already that it could be years away from opening accession talks. Bosnia concluded its negotiations on the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2008 without seeing the agreement enter into force. To an increasing number of people in accession countries the current process appears to be a stairway to nowhere.

So how can enlargement policy break out of its vicious circle? How can it restore its credibility and popularity with EU publics and recapture the imagination of reformers in accession countries?

On 7 June 2014 the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, made a video podcast on Western Balkan enlargement where she asserted: “There are very clear criteria for the steps needed to move closer to the EU. In the end it is up to each country whether they pass through this process rapidly or not.”² That same week outgoing Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Füle spoke in Vienna.³ The commissioner acknowledged the challenge of credibility:

“That’s why I have made it the priority of my mandate to further strengthen the credibility of the enlargement process. While keeping the process strict but fair, we have put fundamentals first, focusing on values and principles, including respect for fundamental rights and freedom of expression.”

This is the crux of the matter. The challenge this creates for the European Commission is huge. It must find ways to convince very different audiences at the same time: sceptical EU member states and their publics, worried about the strictness of the process; and leaders and publics in accession countries who believe that the whole accession process has become arbitrary and unfair. Enlargement without constituencies in both places – regarded as a purely

² Die Bundeskanzlerin, “[Merkel: Balkanstaaten haben klare Beitrittsperspektive](#)”, 7 June 2014.

³ Stefan Füle: “The Thessaloniki Declaration of 2003 reiterated the European Union’s unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans ... There was no ambiguity. The Declaration clearly stated that the future of the Balkans is within the European Union, a perspective that has been consistently proclaimed by the European Council ever since.”

technical, elite-driven process that few people understand – cannot survive the current erosion of trust.

This report is about understanding this dilemma in the context of Macedonia, a country that highlights all these problems of fairness and strictness. The dialogue presented here is fiction. It is, however, based on almost one hundred interviews with Macedonian's in all walks of life, from the country's leading politicians to local officials and small entrepreneurs.

What we found: compared to only a few years ago: the EU has lost the trust and confidence of almost every group in Macedonian society, from the most ardent supporters of the current government to its harshest critics. The EU's pronouncements are met with scepticism, if not cynicism. This is set to grow worse as the 10th anniversary of EU candidate status approaches next year.

Since 2001 the aspiration of eventually joining the EU has played a crucial role in stabilising a country with deep internal – ethnic and political – divisions. As the belief in the credibility of this vision fades in Macedonia, old concerns and fears return. If EU policy makers hope to retain any influence on an increasingly fragile situation, they will need to show clearly that they take seriously the deep crisis of credibility affecting their own role ... and do better going forward.

Enlargement cannot survive unless it is seen to be both strict *and* fair, demanding *and* inspiring, in both the EU *and* in accession countries. This paper sets out a problem; we believe it also points the way towards a practical solution, not just for Macedonia but for the whole region.

STONE BRIDGE CONVERSATION

VLADIMIR: Well, shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.

[*They do not move*]

Imagine Vladimir and Estragon, the two characters in Samuel Becket's play *Waiting for Godot*, as two middle-aged Macedonian men. When they were young, both had hopes for their future. Communism had just collapsed. Macedonia had become independent without conflict. They used to be friends, before they grew apart because of politics. Today they are both disillusioned with the European Union.

Vladimir-the-EU-is-not-fair voted for the current governing party, VMRO, three times in a row. He supports the prime minister, Nikola Gruevski, who came to power in 2006.

Estragon-the-EU-is-not-strict would never vote for VMRO. In previous elections he either supported the main opposition party, SDSM, or abstained.

Let us imagine the two of them sitting on a park bench in Skopje city centre near the Vardar river. It is a late afternoon. They look out at the medieval fortress and the old stone bridge. And they start to talk.⁴

Vladimir: why things are as they are

(Vladimir holds a little booklet in his hands. It is the 2013 European Commission Enlargement Strategy. He reads from it)

“Progress towards membership depends on the steps taken by each country to meet the established criteria, based on the principle of own merits. This is crucial for the credibility of enlargement policy and for providing incentives to the countries to pursue far-reaching reforms.”

(Vladimir turns to Estragon)

Do you hear me, my friend: “Progress depends on the steps taken by each country”? Ha!

You say we should talk about the EU? Well, as we are hanging around waiting, and as we have nothing better to do, let us do so. It is, however, not good for my blood pressure to read about “established criteria”, “own merit” and the “credibility of the enlargement process.”

When it comes to Macedonia, there have never been established criteria. Nothing has ever been about merit. For five years now the European Commission has recommended the opening of accession talks. Last time it did so the member states did not even put a discussion about Macedonia on their agenda.

Should we be surprised, though? Has the EU not broken every promise and betrayed every principle when it comes to us, not just recently, but right from the start?

⁴ Instead of footnotes all references and sources for the facts and arguments presented by Vladimir and Estragon can be found in Annex B online: www.vladimirandestragon.org.

Do you remember when, in 1991, the EU put together a committee led by that French judge, Robert Badinter, to evaluate which new states it should recognise after Yugoslavia collapsed? When his committee said that Macedonia fulfilled the conditions, what did the EU do? It ignored him.

Dubrovnik had already been bombed, Vukovar destroyed, Bosnia was about to turn into a living hell. With the whole Balkans on fire, Antonis Samaras, the Greek foreign minister, launched his campaign against our name and identity. And the EU went along. It told us in summer 1992 that it would only recognise us “under a name which will not include the denomination Macedonia.”

This is how it all started: while we tried to stay out of the war, the EU sided with Greece, where tens of thousands of people then celebrated Milosevic and Karadzic as allies. Have you forgotten this? I have not. Nor have I forgotten how the EU later stood by as Greece declared a trade embargo against us in February 1994, which lasted for nineteen months, at a time when our economy was already on its knees.

Then, ten years later, in 1999, we accepted hundreds of thousands of refugees from Kosovo. This was not our conflict, but we were generous. And worried! Not without reason. In 2001 some of our Albanians, armed in Kosovo, put their guns to our heads. Blew up police cars. People died. And what did we do? Our leaders made a deal in Ohrid. We made concessions. More than any Serbian leader ever made over Kosovo. We changed our constitution. We passed an amnesty. We accepted those who had picked up guns as legitimate politicians in our country. We shared power with them. We also shared public sector jobs despite huge unemployment. Today our prime minister is in coalition with the leader of that Albanian uprising.

Did we get any credit for this? What happened to the promise of the Ohrid Agreement, the first sentence, which says that this agreement would permit “the development of closer and more integrated relations between the Republic of Macedonia and the Euro-Atlantic community”? Today the EU falls over itself to celebrate former war-mongering Serb Radicals as peacemakers. I heard some want to give Ivica Dacic and Hashim Thaci the Nobel Peace Prize. A former ally of Milosevic and a man the Council of Europe suspects of having traded human organs. And our leaders are not democratic enough? Can you believe this?

They consider us “nationalists” because we want to be called what we are: Macedonians. Because we put up a few statues in the centre of our capital. They say our actions and statues are provoking the Greeks. As if Antonis Samaras, the Greek prime minister and father of this whole conflict, needs any provocation. When he was foreign minister in 1992 he wrote a letter to the EU and complained that we added “the Greek apostles Cyril and Methodius” to the “Skopjan pantheon”! Do Cyril and Methodius not belong to us as much as to Greece or Bulgaria? They are the patron saints of Slovakia, for heaven’s sake! Did Greece block Slovakia?

As for the statues, they say they are tacky. Perhaps the artists are no Michelangelos, but I strongly defend our right to commemorate history in any way we wish. Have you seen Heroes Square in Budapest, those Magyar macho men and their moustaches, celebrating an event one thousand years ago? Is Mount Rushmore, with four American presidents carved in stone, not kitsch? At least it put South Dakota on the map! Tourists go there. We are the South Dakota of Europe. And the new Skopje is working for us too!

The Rough Guides puts Macedonia among the top ten tourist destinations in the world for 2014! This is what it says: “The hugely controversial Skopje 2014 project should be complete next year, littering the capital with statues, fountains, bridges and museums, while mesmerizing Lake Ohrid, straddling the border with Albania, is set to become a real magnet for travellers – visit while you can.” Not bad.

Our Southern neighbour claims that Alexander the Great was Greek and Greek only. Was Charlemagne French or German? Does it matter? He was European. Was Alexander not European?

In fact, all I want is for Macedonia to be treated like, let’s say, Slovakia. In Slovakia, they like putting up statues and nobody ridicules them for it. They even put up a huge statue of their medieval hero Svatopluk the Great in the centre of Bratislava recently: a warrior on a horse! Did anybody in Brussels complain? I hear that in Komarno, on the Danube, they have put up dozens of statues in recent years, Hungarians and Slovaks, each celebrating their heroes. They even have disputes over statues of Cyril and Methodius there, between Hungarians and Slovaks! I wonder what the Greek ambassador in Bratislava has to say about this.

(Laughs, then looks very serious)

The truth is, of course: all of this outrage is just an excuse. We know what Antonis Samaras really sees as a provocation. It is the fact that we, Macedonians, exist as a nation. In 1992, when Samaras was foreign minister and it all started, he wrote to the EU calling us “Skopje, an economically non-viable and ethnically antagonistic entity, surrounded by competing ‘suitors’ and ‘protectors’.” He never expected Macedonia to survive as a state.

Fifteen years later, in 2007, Samaras gave another interview and made the same point: “because developments in Kosovo may trigger FYROM’s dissolution, that is why they try to integrate it into Europe and NATO before it is disbanded. If FYROM wants to save itself it needs to change. If it does not change, it will not manage to integrate anywhere, and to survive. The problem is FYROM’s not Greece’s.”

In other words, our survival as a state is not a Greek concern. It is not even in Greece’s interest, as defined by Samaras. In 2008, as a parliamentarian, he told Greek television: “I do not know the exact time but it is definite that in some years Skopje will not exist anymore as a unified entity. Time is on our side.” And he added how he saw our future: “Yes, new states will be created in the region ... As far as Albania is concerned we will gradually have what is called ‘natural Albania’, a term they use so as not to use ‘greater Albania’ and they mean the 3.5 million Albanians in Albania, the 2 million Albanians in Kosovo and around 600,000 in Skopje. This is what I observe and predict.”

Need I say more? At least with Samaras everything is clear: he thinks we need the EU to save ourselves. That is why he blocks our integration. He expects that Macedonia will collapse. He hopes our Albanian minority will do this job for him. Or Bulgaria. Or Serbia. And so he works against our stability and against everything the EU has tried to do in our region. This is an existential threat against us and the EU lets him get away with it! You see, my friend, for me this is the real message behind our warrior on the horse: we will not be intimidated. We are here to stay. Perhaps, one day, even Samaras will have to accept this.

I know what you are thinking now: should we not have tried harder to find a negotiated solution to the name dispute? But tell me: what else should we have done? First we accepted a

humiliating interim name, FYROM. In 1995 we changed our flag. For decades different Macedonian governments have negotiated in good faith. We told everyone many times that we have no claims on anybody's territory. We even changed our constitution to prove that.

And what did we get in return? In 2006 Athens warned us that it would block us *joining* the EU and NATO without a new name. Three years later Athens blocked us even from *starting talks* with the EU! Our civilised response was to go to the International Court of Justice. In December 2011 the International Court of Justice in The Hague ruled in our favour. It was illegal for Greece to block us from joining NATO. And then again, nothing happened. What did the EU say when the ICJ had spoken? Silence.

In fact, there is no justice in this world. This is why I cannot bear it any more when I hear talk about the rule of law. There is no real rule of law, not for Macedonians. The rule of law here is the rule of the strongest. Does the EU expect us to make a deal with Greece under such conditions? To trade away our name and dignity only to be able to start accession talks, which may then never end, because there will be other vetoes, by Greece, or Bulgaria, or who knows by whom? You see what happened to Turkey? We would surely have new hurdles put in our way every time there is a new government in Athens.

I am tired of seeing Matthew Nimetz, the UN negotiator, do another useless round of talks. Perhaps, if he would just admit that his job was hopeless and return his mandate as negotiator it would wake some people up. Perhaps not. I hear that they don't let him.

If the EU, the Germans, the French, want to solve this, their leaders can make one phone call to Greece and it is resolved. The same way in which that dispute between Slovenia and Croatia over the Piran Bay was resolved quickly a few years ago. And if they do not want this, everything stays as it is now. It certainly does not depend on us.

Estragon: ancient heroes and escapism

My dear Vladimir, you will not be surprised that I see things differently. Of course, Greek demands to change our name are unreasonable and their blocking us is deeply unfair. Samaras is playing with fire and the EU's indifference to this is pathetic. But blaming the rest of the world for our predicament is misleading. Our government is neither as blameless nor as powerless as you suggest.

You refer to realities of power politics. Then let's be realistic for a moment: if a country is weak and small and poor and isolated, as we are, then its policies have to be very smart. Its leaders ought to resist the temptation to stick a finger in the eye of our neighbours just because it makes them feel good for a moment. In recent years our leaders have behaved like a bull in a china shop. And the result we see today: we are more isolated than ever before. No foreign leaders come and visit. Skopje is like a train station where no train stops. Today most foreigners believe we are as guilty for the name dispute as Athens.

You refer to our forest of new statues. I am a Slav, a democrat, a husband, a writer, a European. I live in the 21st century. My – our – fellow Macedonian citizens are also Serbs, or Albanians or Turks or Vlachs or Roma. Do we all need Alexander the Great, a warrior born more than two thousand years ago, who invaded India and died in Iraq, to know who we are? Plutarch wrote that his real father was probably Zeus, the playboy on Mount Olympus. Do

you want to be related to Zeus? I am also pretty certain that Alexander himself, who married a Bactrian and a Persian, was no Macedonian nationalist.

You might say that other nations in our region have similar fantasies. No doubt. Turks who think they are the descendants of Hittites and Sumerians, and thus arrived in Anatolia before the Greeks. Romanians who believe that they are the sons and daughters of Trajan's Roman legion and put up Romulus and Remus statues everywhere to prove it. Greeks, whose grandparents spoke Turkish in Cappadocia, or Albanian on an Aegean island or Macedonian in a village outside of Thessaloniki and who are taught in school that they are descendants of Alexander. And to keep up the pretence an Albanian changes his name from Panajot Gjergji to Panagiotis Giorgios to play for their national football team. All sons of Alexander!

Now I find *all* of this ridiculous, and irrelevant in the 21st century. We should all leave Alexander and his kin to historians to argue about. And as for us, citizens of the 21st century Republic of Macedonia, we will be neither more prosperous nor more respected as sons of Alexander. It is like crashing a cocktail party dressed as faux-warriors with plastic helmets about to conquer Asia Minor. In fact, we look daft.

But this is not even the real issue. The real issue is that our prime minister and his party were *never* serious about the EU. I do not say they do not want us to be members. Perhaps they do, if it does not require much effort. But it was never a priority for them.

Remember 2005? VMRO, then still in opposition, needlessly pushed a referendum opposing key provisions of the Ohrid Peace Agreement. This put at risk our efforts to obtain EU candidate status and recklessly endangered inter-ethnic relations. Fortunately, people preferred to stay away and have a drink instead. If it had passed we would not even be an EU candidate now, but right at the end of the queue of integration, together with Kosovo.

Remember 2006? After the elections VMRO refused to form a coalition with the largest Albanian party, DUI. Again needless tensions: We angered the EU and lost momentum at a crucial moment. Instead of focusing on accession talks. VMRO's antiquation policy took off then. The statue of Alexander was put up in Prilep in October 2006. Skopje Airport was renamed after Alexander the Great in December. Was this smart, necessary, worth it?

Then we had the spring 2008 exhibition in in the Skopje Cultural Centre, on the eve of the NATO summit, advertised with posters throughout town depicting the Greek flag with a swastika. Great timing indeed.

Then, after the Greek veto at the Bucharest summit in April 2008 on our accession to NATO, our government gave up on the EU altogether. Instead, in July our prime minister and our archbishop welcomed Prince Ghazanfar Ali Khan of the Hunza people in Pakistan, "direct descendants of Alexander's troops" and our long lost Central Asian Muslim brothers. Our remaining friends! If only we all spoke Burushaski ...

In short: after leading us into total isolation, our government's obsession with our history, ancient and recent, became a drug of escape. Intellectual cocaine.

In 2009 the European Commission recommended for the first time opening accession talks with Macedonia. You blame Samaras for our current isolation. But from 2009 to 2011 the prime minister in Athens was George Papandreou, who, as foreign minister, has been

pragmatic on the name issue. We should have seized this moment to, at least, open EU accession talks under our interim name. And what did we do?

Well, you know what we did! We doubled down on our infatuation with antiquity! This was the year in which we renamed our central motorway “Alexander the Macedonian”. And the City Stadium “Vardar” became “Philip II of Macedonia Arena”. In 2009 our chief national archaeologist declared that “we can only defend a name if we have classical antique roots.” We wasted yet another opportunity.

Before 2005 some smart Macedonian diplomacy managed to handle relations with Athens. But that was before our statues made us look both obsessed and provocative. For what gain?

As for Skopje 2014: We could have invested our rare resources in restoring our real heritage, instead of commissioning a foundry in Florence to supply our capital with kitsch. We could have built hiking paths in our mountains. Developed nature tourism around Lake Prespa. Organized a big annual music festival in our fortresses in Skopje or Ohrid.

By all means, let us build a triumphal arch once we are members of the EU and have as strong an economy as Slovakia. Let us put up another arch in Veles, another warrior on a horse in Bitola, name another street after Alexander the Macedonian in Kicevo. Or, since we have that street already, a highway named after his lover Hephaestion would be fine too.

My bigger point is this. We need the EU more than the EU needs us. We cannot be any less focused, any less smart about overcoming the obstacles, than previous small and poor countries that managed to join. Estonia. Latvia. Croatia. Even Bulgaria after 1997. And the whole record of VMRO suggests that in fact it is not prepared to do what it takes, even if there were no Greek veto offering an easy excuse.

Vladimir: on double standards

My friend, you are unfair. We will never know what might have been. I could ask why your favourite party, SDSM, did not do the obvious and apply for EU membership in 1996 when it was in power? Perhaps we would have joined the EU together with Bulgaria in 2007 already. But what is the use of looking back and speculating?

It seems to me we both agree on one thing, though. At this moment, with Samaras in power in Athens, and with Germany and France unwilling to put any pressure on this or any other Greek government, we *are* stuck. Immobilized. Frozen. Even if the holy mother Theresa rose from her grave in India and returned to her hometown Skopje and were elected our president it would make no difference on this issue. So the question, looking forward, is: what happens next? Given our situation, what will the EU in particular do now?

Here is what really makes me angry. I have heard that some EU member states put pressure on the European Commission to *withdraw* the recommendation it has made for five years in a row to open accession talks with Macedonia!

Figure this out. First Greece blocks us. Then the EU is unwilling or incapable of doing anything about it. And then the same EU prepares to blame *us* for this standstill.

Suddenly our government is too nationalist? Suddenly we are “not democratic enough”? Suddenly the “real problem” is the state of our media, or human rights, or our judiciary? This is so shamelessly hypocritical, it takes my breath away.

I know, Estragon, that you are critical of our current government. And I admit, if you want, that we are not Sweden or Germany when it comes to human rights. But even you will have to admit that to use this as an excuse not to open EU accession talks with us is an intolerable double standard.

Compared to which of our neighbours is Macedonia “not democratic enough”? Compared to Montenegro, which received candidate status five years after us and is negotiating since June 2012? They have *never* had a change in power in Podgorica since they started having elections! That place has been run by the same party, the former communists, and by the same man – first as prime minister, then as president, then as prime minister again – since 1989. Meanwhile we have had five changes of governing party here: VMRO-SDSM-VMRO-SDSM-VMRO. Is this – repeated peaceful changes of governments following free and fair elections – not the very definition of democratic consolidation?

Or Serbia, the EU’s new darling in the region, also now a negotiating country. A few years ago Tomislav Nikolic and Aleksander Vucic happily served in the Radical Party under Vojislav Seselj’s leadership, while Seselj was on trial in The Hague for war crimes. Nikolic held up Putin posters during the 2008 election campaign. Then the Radicals lost these elections, saw the light, changed, turned into pro-Europeans and came to power. Now Nikolic is president, Vucic prime minister and Milosevic’s former ally Dacic controls the police. The Radicals have an absolute majority. Good for them, but you cannot convince me that Serbia is somehow suddenly more “democratic” than Macedonia.

How about our EU neighbours? In Bulgaria Bozhidar Dimitrov is not only the director of the National Museum. He was also a minister in the Bulgarian government *after* it joined the EU. I assume EU officials do not know his “bestseller”, “The Ten Lies of Macedonism.” For Dimitrov, we Macedonians do not exist. Our language does not exist. Our church is illegitimate. We are to ignore this and instead to listen politely when the Bulgarian president Rosen Plevneliev lectures us, as he did in 2012: “Bulgaria cannot grant an EU certificate to the actions of the government in Skopje which is systematically employing an ideology of hate towards Bulgaria.” He even said that we (!) should stop with our “anti-Bulgarian campaign and the manipulation of historical facts.” This is a bit rich, wouldn’t you say? And this country does not only deny our history. When a Bulgarian and a German historian planned a conference on art and anti-Islamic stereotypes surrounding an Ottoman massacre in the 19th century, they received death threats. Politicians accused them of treason. And we are the ones “not ready for accession”?

Bulgaria is already in the EU, of course. Turkey is negotiating. Good for them. But what exactly makes us *less* fit for opening accession talks than Turkey? Minority rights, religious freedom, freedom of assembly; tear gas, journalists in jail, corruption charges leading to summary dismissals of hundreds of police ... Need I go on? Or is it that Turkey is big and we are small?

Finally, back to the oldest EU member in our region, Greece. At least we do not have any openly fascist parties here like Golden Dawn. You heard how in Greece the neo-fascists won 9 per cent of the vote in the European elections this May? In the race for the mayor of Athens the fascists got 16 per cent! And their candidate, Ilias Kasidiaris, has a swastika tattoo and has

beaten up female politicians live on TV. Dimitris Psarras, author of *The Black Bible of Golden Dawn*, described the ties of Golden Dawn with the Greek state. And now Greece and Bulgaria are to judge whether we are democratic enough to open accession talks?

You referred to the outrage over one poster with a swastika in Skopje in April 2008. And yet, our government, this current government, built a Holocaust Memorial Centre for the Jews of Macedonia to commemorate their tragic fate during World War II. There is no such centre in Thessaloniki as far as I am aware. And now we are lectured about the politics of history?

Let us be serious. The facts are clear when it comes to human rights. We have primary schools in Macedonia in five different languages. In the EU member states Bulgaria and Greece ethnic Macedonians are denied their language. We have a Turkish party in parliament. Turks born in Greece are citizens of the EU, but are not even allowed to call themselves “Turks”. Our Roma are certainly better off and less discriminated than Roma in Hungary or in Bulgaria or in most EU members. In no other small country in Europe is there as much ethnic, religious, linguistic diversity. Our capital is officially bilingual, Albanian and Macedonian. And yet, we are “nationalists” and do not meet the Copenhagen criteria?

The dirty secret is that all this talk about standards, and values, and criteria ... so much humbug. There are no standards. It is all about power and lobbying. None of this is about merit, or performance.

As for the media: yes, there are problems, but problems exist everywhere. If people in the EU complain about freedom of the media in Macedonia I ask: are things any better in Montenegro? An opposition editor said recently that hate speech there is “worse today than under Milosevic”. Yet Montenegro is negotiating with the EU.

Recently the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, Nils Muiznieks, published a commentary on press freedom in Europe. Muiznieks sees problems in many places. He mentions Turkey. Ukraine. Bosnia. Spain. Italy. Serbia. Azerbaijan. And yes, in passing he mentions Macedonia. It is one of many countries with problems. Listen to this, as he describes Italy and Montenegro:

“Apart from the police, journalists are also frequently targeted by non-state actors. Ossigeno per l’Informazione, which carries out valuable awareness-raising work on press freedom in Italy, told me over 1,800 journalists in the country have been victims of some sort of violence, including arson and threats, since 2006. In the first three months of 2014, more than 150 cases have been reported, well above the average of previous years.

Lack of safety for journalists and impunity for crimes committed against journalists remain a serious problem in Montenegro, as I observed during my visit to the country last March. While several cases of the past are still unsolved, including the murder of Dusko Jovanovic, editor-in-chief and owner of the daily Dan, new cases occur. Among the most recent victims is Lidija Nikcevic, another journalist for the newspaper Dan, who was brutally beaten by masked assailants wielding a baseball bat.”

Or his description of more “subtle” methods of pressure, defamation laws and lawsuits:

“Lawsuits against journalists are common practice in Italy, where the defamation law introduced by the Fascist regime remains in place. Under this law many journalists are sued and sometimes sentenced to prison terms, like Francesco Gangemi, a 79-year-old journalist, who last October was sentenced to two years in prison for libel and perjury.

In Slovenia, another country where defamation remains a criminal offence, the Prosecutors' office in April indicted Anuska Delic, a journalist for the newspaper Delo, for having published allegedly classified material in 2011 while researching the rise of extremist groups in the country and the involvement of army and police members with these groups. She may pay for this with up to three years in prison.

The Greek criminal code also allows for the arrest of journalists in cases of libel. Though guidelines require police officers to inform the prosecutor before arresting a journalist for libel, evidence shows that the police often disregard this requirement. Just recently, after a Greek MP sued several journalists for criticising her statements, the police went to newsrooms to arrest them without the prior consent of a prosecutor. A journalist from Eleftheros Typos was kept overnight in police custody before being freed by a judge the following day.

Another EU country where inadequate legislation threatens press freedom is Croatia. Under the country's new penal code, anybody, including journalists, can be convicted for causing humiliation, even if what they report on is true. This was the case of Slavica Lukic, a journalist for Jutarnji list, who has been fined 4,000 euros by the courts for having disclosed the mishandling of public funds by a private healthcare company."

Yes, he also mentions Macedonia and one single case, Kezarovski, where accusations are mostly based on rumours. So how bad is this in comparison?

Actually, one institution that has remained sober and fair in discussing all this has been the European Commission in its 2013 Progress Report. In this report it listed what we have done, reforms, remaining problems, in a calm and objective tone. It was not swayed by the hysteria of government opponents here in Skopje.

Who is more serious in your view: the European Commission or Freedom House, which says that we have only "partly free media"? I read that they use 60 analysts to score all countries in the world and then send their conclusions to "a half-dozen two- or three-member panels of people" picked as experts. It makes for good headlines but is this in any way objective?

Then again: even if you believe Freedom House rankings mean something – and I do not – these very same rankings recently stated that Turkey has "no free media at all". And Turkey is negotiating with the EU as we talk! I understand: Turkey is big and we are small, so why not beat up on us? Is this what the EU wants to teach us about its values?

Estragon: the race to the bottom

My dear Vlado, thank you for referring to the European Commission's 2013 report. For me this sums up the whole problem in our current relationship with the EU.

You refer to European double standards a lot. Let us be real. Every single organization, non-governmental or international, that has looked at media freedom in Macedonia, for many years now, has come to the same conclusion: that the current situation is terrible. The UN envoy Frank La Rue. The OSCE envoy Dunja Mijatovic. Reporters without Borders. Freedom House. IREX. The European Federation of Journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists. Most EU ambassadors. The OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights from Warsaw. In fact the *only* institution that appears to agree with you, the only report which sees things developing in a good direction, is the 2013 progress report by the European Commission!

(Grabs report and goes to page 44)

Listen to this! One paragraph, seven sentences, on the media situation in Macedonia. I read them to you in the order in which they have been put together. When I first read this I could not believe it:

“In the area of freedom of expression and the media, the Criminal Code was amended to decriminalise defamation and insult.”

A step forward. Problem solved, surely.

“A new Law on Civil Liability for Insult and Defamation was adopted, among other things setting out maximum levels of damages which could be awarded in civil cases.”

Another step forward. Problem solved, again.

“In 2012, over 200 judges, lawyers, journalists and other practitioners participated in training on freedom of expression and by September 2013, 161 civil court judges competent to deal with defamation had undergone a specific training programme.”

A third step forward. Another tick.

“70 key judgments of the European Court of Human Rights relating to Article 10 (freedom of expression) have been translated and made available on the websites of the Ministry of Justice and the Academy for Judges and Prosecutors, to act as a training tool.”

Great. I am almost done reading this paragraph before the very mildest of criticisms creeps in! Note how:

“New draft laws on media and on audio-visual media services were prepared which also include provisions on freedom of expression and the media; however during the consultation phase these were *criticised by some stakeholders as potentially open to abuse.*”

So: another possible step forward, criticized by “some stakeholders” as “potentially” open to abuse, but not by the Commission? It continues like this:

“There are continued concerns about the lack of transparency of government advertising and self-censorship due to economic pressures exerted on journalists and media owners.”

Some people have some concerns. Are they justified? Who is to blame? And here is the last sentence:

“*Polarisation of the media and poor professional standards hamper the public’s right of access to diverse viewpoints and accurate information.*”

So who, my friend, is to blame here? Polarisation! Which is everybody. As well as unprofessional journalists. Which journalists? All of them! They just do not know how to do their job.

Perhaps more training would help? Another conference to lecture them how to be better at their job? Never mind editors. Owners. Economic interests. Lawsuits. Intimidation. The

closing of independent channels and papers. Or the fact that these polarised journalists have just seen a highly professional colleague die in a mysterious car accident. Or another colleague, whom even the US State Department considers a political prisoner, go to jail.

We have seen a massive restructuring in our media landscape. Where is A1 TV today, which most of us used to watch every day and which went dark a few years ago? What has happened to our most prestigious investigative journal Fokus? All gone.

I do not know myself what really happened to Nikola Mladenov, the editor of Fokus newspaper, who died in a mysterious car accident in March 2013. I do not personally know Tomislav Kezarovski, the investigative journalist who did research on this accident, and who is now in prison on trumped up charges. But I know what the effect of all this is on our beleaguered community of remaining government critics.

So why does the Progress Report not address all this directly? Here is my theory. The European Commission feels bad about the Greek veto. It believes that, if it criticizes our government, this would give more ammunition to the Greeks, or to sceptics in EU member states. It wants accession negotiations to start without further delay. So do I, of course. But whitewashing the shortcomings in our democracy is too high a price to pay! And this is what they ended up doing.

You want more evidence for double standards? Let me read to you what Erwan Fouere has written recently. In September 2013 he described Macedonia as a “country in deep trouble.” Fragility and tensions. Inter-ethnic violence on the increase. A “selective approach and double standards in the application of the rule of law.” An atmosphere of intimidation. As for media, and open debate, he wrote about:

“... a climate of fear in the population at large, generated by the all-pervasive control of the main governing party, which has been in power since July 2006. This control covers not only the main state organs such as the judiciary and public administration, but also the electoral process and, above all, the media ... Criticism of the government is not tolerated; those who dare to raise their voices are branded ‘enemies of the state’.”

Just recently Fouere went even further, saying that Macedonia is today not a democracy anymore, but instead “a state where government controls all the levers of power, including the judiciary and the electoral process, does not tolerate any minority or dissenting views, and uses fear and intimidation to exercise its authority over society.”

Now, you know of course that Erwan Fouere was the head of the EU Delegation in Skopje from 2005 to 2011. Heading the Commission office he saw Macedonia “substantially meeting the political conditions.” The very moment he is free to speak his mind he says the opposite. I am sure it is now that he says what he really thinks.

The paradox is this: our democracy has deteriorated *dramatically since the European Commission gave our government a clean bill of health in 2009*. The recommendation to open accession talks turned into a curse. Today we have election fraud, media censorship and a return of fear. And a European Commission that has lost its credibility.

We desperately need clear standards. An outside mirror, a critical Commission, credible review. What we do not need is for the European Commission to sugar-coat our realities. For the EU to betray its true friends in Macedonia: people who, like I, believed that EU accession is about standards and values and democracy and human rights.

You say things are equally bad elsewhere. I do not live in Turkey or Bulgaria, though. I live here. I derive no pleasure from a bad situation anywhere else.

If things are really as bad or worse elsewhere, should the EU not defend its values and standards everywhere more strongly? Perhaps it is failing everywhere? This possibility only makes me feel even worse. Are you happy that there just possibly might be other places with similar or worse human rights? This is a race to the bottom and we – you and I – are the victims!

Vladimir: Macedonia as the first in class

You say that Macedonia does not meet international standards. You imply that this government benefits from lack of standards. You are wrong. The opposite is true.

Did you notice: every time in recent years when Macedonia *was* treated fairly – when there were objective criteria, and real assessments and meaningful comparisons of our performance not distorted by politics – we excelled!

Take the World Bank “Ease of Doing Business” surveys, where we are among the best in Europe. The World Bank is clearly a serious organization. And so is the Economist, which has praised these “Ease of Doing Business” reports repeatedly. So here is an objective assessment, and we do very well.

Or take the only recent instance where the EU applied clear and fair standards to every Balkan country: assessing the implementation of reforms required for visa liberalisation in 2009. Here objective EU experts in their field found that we were doing better than any of our neighbours in meeting a whole series of demanding conditions outlined in the visa liberalisation roadmaps. Macedonia was the best performer in the Balkans. We inspired others.

Or look at the 2013 progress report by the European Commission. In chapter after chapter the Commission found that we are doing better than Serbs or Montenegrins even now. More progress, more advanced alignment with the acquis. This is serious, detailed and impressive. Whenever we were challenged we performed. Give us a fair process and we will surprise the world.

But why are fair, meritocratic processes the exception and not the rule? This government has no reason to fear them. What we must fear is the status quo: when assessments are based on rumours, on prejudice, on geopolitics. Yes: we are not Germany or Sweden. We had decades of communist repression, remember? We stumbled through another decade as an independent state, a decade we wasted. We are poor. We have too few jobs. But so do all of our neighbours.

We are doing well considering that we have to cope with a global economic crisis without the financial support from the EU that Greece and Bulgaria receive every year. Bulgaria has its highways paid for by the EU. We need to get our credit from China. Greek farmers receive subsidies from the EU. We have to help them ourselves. Do not tell me that Bulgaria or Greece are the places to look to for lessons in economic management.

I recently talked to some of our most successful businesspeople in Stip. Serious people. Most of them are in textiles. They export to the EU, they compete, they know all about their sector. And they mostly agree with me that we are in fact already doing better than Bulgaria in most areas. For them joining the EU “is not important”. We are moving faster than neighbouring EU members, Greece and Bulgaria. As one of them told me, “In Europe we are the best in customs and in policing. Bulgaria is ten years behind us.”

Some things would be easier. Macedonia joining the EU would abolish customs procedures that last currently two days per load. But there is little more. In the end one entrepreneur told me: “The EU is like an aspirin pill, the headache goes away and you feel better, but the problems are not solved. We are growing up healthier than our neighbours.”

I also do not like it when you imply that our future depends on something that is outside of our control. Even with an EU captured by Greece I need to get out of bed in the morning.

I refuse to be defeated. This I like about our prime minister: if the French do not like us, or the Greeks, or the Bulgarians ... well, then we go to India or China to find investors. At least it was Skopje 2014 and not Skopje 2024. It was not an abstract meaningless long-term goal.

Finland was a successful small country even before it joined the EU in 1995! It is possible for us too! We should remember this. If we are realists, we should accept that nothing good has come from Brussels in years. We must not be naïve and see the EU as a magic wand. We do not need it to survive.

Estragon: the great illusion

You say we need clear standards, clear language, and that perhaps we do not need the EU. I think what we need above all else is to burst the bubble of our illusions, which the current government and its media are feeding.

You suggest that Skopje 2014 will lead to a tourist boom? Is this how the business of tourism works? How much real investment have we seen in our tourism sector? How many of our hotels, in Skopje, in Ohrid, in Prespa, are up to the standards of any decent hotel in Turkey today? Have you been to the Hotel Continental in Skopje recently? 70 Euro per room for ... well go there! And it is like this across the sector.

You say our government is “at least doing things”, like Skopje 2014. In fact, Gruevski reminds me of a goalkeeper in a penalty shootout. He decides to throw himself into one corner because it looks better than standing still. Perhaps. But this goalkeeper never saves a penalty, does not practice, and relies on luck. And so we live in illusions, clutching at straws.

Remember the stories about Subrata Roy, the Indian billionaire who was supposed to invest in luxury tourist resorts and bring tens of thousands of cows? For a few months our media presented him as a magician, the solution to all our troubles. We had a big party in central Skopje with fireworks and Indian dancers. Then we hear that he is in jail in India. When something sounds too good to be true, it usually is!

You mention Bulgaria. Yes, Bulgaria is the poorest member of the EU today. I remember how in 1996 Bulgaria had an economic meltdown. The average monthly salary was then the lowest in the region, dropping from \$120 in January 1996 to \$28 in December. It also had the lowest level of FDI stock per capita of all Central European countries. But in 1997 Ivan

Kostov, their prime minister, defined the objective of EU accession within one decade, and since then Bulgaria has overtaken us: in GDP per capita, in exports, in investment, and in jobs. In 2012 Bulgaria had an employment rate of 59 per cent compared to our 44 per cent. That is a lot of jobs we do not have!

Employment rate 2011 (age group 15-64)

Country	2003	2012
European Union – 27	62.6	64.3
Bulgaria	52.5	58.8
Macedonia	n/a	44.0

Here is one fact: the pre-accession process and the reforms it has triggered have been a phenomenal motor of helping countries in the region catch up economically. Just look at the results in Poland, in the Baltic states, in Slovakia, in Romania in the first decade of the 21st century!

Spectacular convergence: GDP per capita in PPS 2001 – 2012 (EU-28 = 100)⁵

Country	2001	Increase	2012
Lithuania	42	+30	72
Estonia	47	+24	71
Latvia	39	+25	64
Romania	28	+22	50
Poland	48	+19	67
Bulgaria	30	+17	47

And here is another fact: Macedonia is falling ever further behind! GDP per capita, investment per capita, our employment rate ... in all categories. Our country is one of the poorest in Europe. Annual GDP per capita stands at €3,600, compared to €25,000 for the EU. Relative to what we can buy with this in Macedonia it is just one third of the EU average. Very few of us have work. Those few who have a job receive an average net salary of € 350. And because so few people work, our average monthly income per capita is only €120. Our employment rate stands at 44 per cent. The average rate for the EU is 64 per cent – a dramatic 20 percent-point difference!

This affects all of us! Almost 800,000 citizens out of just over 2 million cannot pay mortgages, loans or utility bills on time. Three out of four Macedonians only manage to live on their household's income with "difficulty" or with "great difficulty". More than a quarter of our population lived on less than €86 a month in 2011.

Remember the 2012 Gallup Balkan Monitor? It showed that a quarter of Macedonians "had experienced times in the last 12 months when they could not afford to buy food for themselves and family". Across the Balkans, only Albania and Kosovo had worse figures. And according to the World Bank our income distribution is also one of the most unequal in Europe!

200,000 Macedonians have emigrated since 1990 and most of them since 2001! The number of our citizens in EU countries increased from 34,000 in 1996 to 183,000 in 2012, with

⁵ Eurostat, [GDP per capita in PPS, Index \(EU28=100\)](#).

another 62,000 in Switzerland. We saw more than 20,000 Bulgarian citizenships issued to Macedonians between 2004 and 2009. By October 2013 this number stood at almost 55,000. Meanwhile, those who do not emigrate are paralysed. We no longer need a visa, but three quarters of us cannot afford any travel during their holidays.

Do I blame Gruevski for all of this? Of course not. But any government is irresponsible that does not put this social and economic crisis at the top of its agenda. Our prime minister talks a lot about foreign direct investment. He even wrote a book about it. Once I actually believed that, perhaps, in this field, he was a moderniser. But look: there is almost no investment. We have industrial zones for foreign investors, which is nice, but the one in Tetovo is empty and the one in Stip has one (!) investor. And this is not surprising: who wants to invest in an isolated country with bad relations with all of its neighbours?

Stagnation is built into this system. It is a stagnation that kills us. Our GDP per capita in 2010 was still below the levels of the early 1980s. We have to reverse decades of decline. Instead our long-term decline continues. We run down assets. We manipulate data. We play with statistics. We accumulate debt. VMRO voters depend on the state: a state salary, a state pension, and meagre agricultural subsidies. The government is increasing public sector jobs. Some statistics suggest that private sector employment *decreased* by 32,000, but the public sector *added* 50,000 work places, in recent years. Perhaps it is even worse ... who can believe any of our statistics?

Official total central government debt has doubled from € 1.4 billion in 2008 to € 2.8 billion in 2012. We have the perfect political economy of stagnation: two mono-ethnic one-party states handing out subsidies. We live off the future, which is possible because there was such low debt in 2006. This cannot last.

I would expect international institutions to hold up a mirror, to help us see objectively what is going on. Instead the World Bank, the IMF, the European Commission have praised our government. According to the World Bank the business climate here is better than in Switzerland or the Netherlands. And we are one of the top reformers in this field. We peddle this myth abroad and in our national media. We feel great.

I took a closer look at these rankings. Do you know how easily they can be manipulated? Here is how it is done. There are ten indicators the World Bank uses. Switzerland beats us, not surprisingly, on seven out of ten: dealing with construction permits; getting electricity; registering property; paying taxes; trading across borders; resolving insolvency and enforcing contracts.

Doing Business Rank 2014	Macedonia	Switzerland
Getting Credit	3	28
Starting a business	7	104
Protecting Investors	16	170
Paying Taxes	26	16
Resolving Insolvency	52	47
Dealing with Construction Permits	63	58
Getting Electricity	76	8
Registering Property	84	16
Trading Across Borders	89	35
Enforcing Contract	95	20
<i>Overall global Ranking</i>	25	29

On the other hand, Macedonia is exceptionally good in three fields only. The first is starting a business, which in theory takes a few days here and a few weeks in Switzerland. I ask you: how much difference does this really make if it takes 16 days to set up a business, if after that things work well? Anyway, this is one way for Macedonia to beat the Swiss. The second is “getting credit.” Totally implausibly it is supposedly easier to get credit in Skopje than in Zurich. I wonder how this sounds to our medium-sized companies that struggle to get loans. Finally, my favourite: “protecting investors”, an assessment based on an obscure hypothetical scenario which does not apply to 99 percent of Macedonian businesses, but where for some reason Switzerland is 170th in the world.

Now add it all up, and, voila, you have the great illusion served by the World Bank: Macedonia 25th in the world, Switzerland 29th. Is this what the combined intellectual might of the World Bank has produced in order to help us understand our situation? I hear that Kosovo and Putin’s Russia also want to focus on the Doing Business ranking now to improve their image. Perhaps they should hire a Macedonian consultant?

These same World Bank experts found that in 2012 there was no member state of the European Union where it was as easy to start a business or to register property as it was in Belarus! That an investor was better protected in Minsk (82nd position in the world) than in Munich (100th position). That Georgia, *wunderkind* of Doing Business, was ahead of all but two EU members in terms of the ease of doing business, although still the second poorest country in Europe. In fact, in 2012 the World Bank presented the top ten countries where the business climate had improved most since 2003: Georgia, Rwanda, Belarus, Burkina Faso, Macedonia, Egypt, Mali, Colombia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Republic. Need I say more?

You mention Finland. Yes, but what did they do? They focused especially on education to catch up. We have focused on indulging in romantic fantasies about our glorious past. This is the decisive difference. What we do not discuss, though, is how we educate the next generation.

Now here is a ranking that I think matters much more: remember the OECD PISA tests on education in 2000, which Macedonia took? It revealed that more than half of all students at age 14 in Macedonia had the lowest level of reading ability, where most students “at best, can handle only the most basic reading tasks.” It was one of the worst outcomes in Europe. We were in the same group as Albania.

We discussed it at the time and you blamed the poor results on the “communists”. And what have we done since? After 2000 Macedonia stopped taking the PISA assessments. What has the EU said about it? Nothing. In the 2013 progress report there was only one paragraph on education. (*Picks up the brochure and reads*):

“Further steps were taken towards improving the infrastructure and the quality of education at all levels, such as the recruitment of about 250 additional teachers for primary and secondary schools for the academic year 2012/13; investment in the education infrastructure; and a reinforced focus of secondary school curricula on entrepreneurial skills. Yet, the general qualification of the workforce remains low, and matching the skills of graduates with the needs of potential employers remains a major challenge. A strategy for vocational training reform was adopted, and practical experience during education was made mandatory. There was little progress in implementing the adopted reforms.”

This is 90 per cent true and 100 per cent useless. What is the point? Our schools do not teach students how to read, but have “a reinforced focus on entrepreneurial skill”!

Anyways, the progress reports. I actually still read them! I wonder who else does this. Read this from the 2013 report on economic fundamentals: “Domestic consensus on the fundamentals of economic policies was broadly maintained, even though the parliament adopted the 2013 central government budget under controversial circumstances.” Expelling members of the opposition during a debate on the budget, followed by a boycott of parliament, is an expression of a “domestic consensus on fundamentals”? What does the absence of consensus look like?

The EU needs to tell us what is really going on! We need the transformative power of the EU. The accession process is an opportunity to carry out in 10 or 20 years reforms that would otherwise take a hundred years, or never happen at all. We need the technical expertise from the EC and from member states, political and financial support, and permanent pressure. You make it sound as if we were doing so well that we would do the EU a favour by considering joining. For us this ought to be a matter of national survival: education, reform, investment, integration. We cannot ever prosper as an odd little country, revelling in illusions.

Only, who can say this openly in Macedonia? Our media are controlled. So we celebrate ancient warrior-ancestors. We welcome brothers from the Hindukush. We dream of billions from mysterious Indians. Some of our intellectuals are too busy rebuilding Skopje or painting heroic pictures for the VMRO museum. Others are silenced. And when there is criticism, our government holds up the European Commission progress report like Perseus holds up the severed head of Medusa: and all critics freeze.

Why does the EU play along? Here is my theory to explain the EU’s puzzling behaviour. For many in the EU, enlargement has become a burden. So what they do is keep talking about enlargement, and yet counting on Greece, helped by our government, to block us. Or on Cyprus to block Turkey. And on Spain and others to block Kosovo. And on Bosnia to block itself.

Then, in order to placate our leaders, the EU praises them for meaningless “progress.” Because it feels bad about its own policy and fears instability. It is a cynical bargain. And it drives me into despair.

Vladimir-the-EU-is-not-fair

(Vladimir looks up and on seeing the sun setting turns to Estragon)

Let me try to wrap up this conversation. Even if we are not actually going to go anywhere after this.

EU member states keep asserting that EU accession is about merit. We both know this is not true, though. The sad truth is that the EU is a bully. If you are not drunk on Euro-illusions, like some of our intellectuals, you see that, like any bully, the EU never admits any mistake. Nothing is ever its fault. Instead, it goes after the weakest, and we are, unfortunately, weak. I expect they will continue to blame everything on us.

I want Macedonia to join the EU, precisely because I do not want my children to be bullied in the way we are now. I want our entrepreneurs to have the same conditions to export as Greeks or Bulgarians. I want our farmers to have the same support. I want the EU to help us – no more and no less than it does in Bulgaria – build new roads.

If I trusted the EU, I would, perhaps, even be in favour of some compromise on our name. The kind of compromises our government has in fact contemplated and discussed: geographically qualifying the name of the country for some uses, “Northern Republic of Macedonia” or something like this. Obviously, though, I would never trade away our right to be considered Macedonians speaking Macedonian. I am sure: nor would any government, now or in the future. Not even your hero, the former president and former communist Kiro Gligorov, was prepared to do that!

But we are not going to capitulate and be cheated. We survived the Ottomans, Serb occupation, Bulgarian occupation, decades of communism, the horrible 1990s, the uprising in 2001. We will not now fall on our knees and beg others for help. Nobody should expect us to sell our soul. Of course our people are frustrated. We are constantly being provoked. We live in a difficult neighbourhood. The existence of our language, the legitimacy of our church, our very national identity are challenged all the time.

I am not even angry anymore. I am sad. I want the EU to treat Macedonia like it treats other Europeans. But it will not. So this is it. Accession policy is not fair. This is a dream that will never come true, and it is not good to live in dreams. Otherwise we will still sit here, two decades from now. Like last time, when we waited for Godot ...

Estragon-the- EU-is-not-strict

My dear Vladimir, this is the bottom line for me: I fear for our future. You suggest we have time and the status quo is acceptable. But you play with fire. We had an ethnic conflict in 2001. We have a history of tension. Ours is a traumatized society. There is fear of pensions or state salaries not being paid, of further decline. I understand why our people put stability above everything else, but unfortunately, there is no stability where we are going.

Where I look I see new fears, fanned on purpose. An aggressive, nationalist, anti-EU discourse is spreading in our media. TV moderator Milenko Nedelkovski, for instance, on his television show, names our journalists and threatens them personally: “All you traitorous bastards, do not f... with the Macedonian people. The hand of the Macedonians will come wherever you are.” He spews hate speech, pure and simple. And then our government ministers go on his show to give one of their rare interviews! You believe this is a coincidence?

Remember: we passed a non-discrimination law in order to obtain visa liberalisation. Non-discrimination is a central human rights issue in the EU’s enlargement strategy documents. And yet, today we witness an ever more aggressive campaign against gays and lesbians in this country. For Milenko Nedelkovski the whole EU is a “failing community of homosexuals”, and it is thus a good thing for Macedonia to be outside! He is just like Dmitry Kiselev, Putin’s media henchman, now banned from travelling to the US. The same aggression. The same arguments. The same paranoia.

In addition to fear there is hate. Did you see the pictures of Macedonian heads, cut off by Greeks rebels, presented to the Greek orthodox priest in the big painting in our great new Museum on the Macedonian Struggle? This image stuck with me, and I wonder if this is not how it was intended.

In that museum, I saw school children with tears in their eyes, moved by the story of our struggle against our many enemies. Cruelties by Ottomans, Greeks, communists. The most common exhibit in this museum is guns: they are everywhere. Is this our history, our identity, our future? Is this the official vision how to bring up the next generation?

Or take the statute of the *Assassins of Salonica*, right over there, next to the old stone bridge in the centre of the city. It is one thing to put a pregnant oversized Olympia, mother of Alexander the Great, in the city centre. But it is another thing to honour early 20th century anarchists whose claim to fame was to kill civilians. Putting a bomb in the Ottoman Bank in Thessaloniki in 1903. Throwing bombs in a café. What is the message of honouring such people, both in our new museum and with a big statue in the very heart of our city? Is this cult of death and murderers, in a country as fragile as ours, not a reason to be terrified?

My friend, we are trapped in a vicious circle. The Greek veto blocks us, demotivates us and embarrasses the EU. This has made the Commission soft on protecting standards. The EU has lost all credibility. Instead of reform we see this society's demons being woken up again.

You never really believed that we needed the EU, did you? You think we might find a third path to national prosperity, a 21st century non-aligned Macedonia. I do not believe this for a second. We need to integrate in order to catch up and to strengthen our democracy. We need this shared perspective to hold together our traumatised diverse society.

I believe in European values and standards. I no longer believe in EU enlargement policy. You say you are sad and frustrated. I feel like an orphan. I want the EU to defend its values here: human rights, liberal democracy, respect and tolerance. I do not see it doing this. And perhaps it never will, before it is too late again.

POZZO'S PLEA AND A WAY FORWARD

“Is there anything I can do, that's what I ask myself, to cheer them up? I have given them bones, I have talked to them about this and that, I have explained the twilight, admittedly. But is it enough that's what tortures me, is it enough?”

(Pozzo)

(Enter Pozzo, wearing a crumpled jacket. He had walked by earlier and had listened silently to the conversation of Vladimir and Estragon standing behind their bench)

Good evening. May I join you?

(He shakes their hands. Vladimir and Estragon are puzzled)

Please forgive me. I admit I was eavesdropping. It seems to be what everybody does these days.

Let me introduce myself. I am a guest in your city. I just spent a few days here. I met many people. It was depressing. To cheer myself up I decided to take a little walk along the river. Then I heard you discuss my former job.

You see, I have worked on enlargement for many years in the European Commission. It was, for most of this time, the best job I could have imagined. Exciting, challenging, meaningful. Recently, of course, things have not been so good. As for your country ...

(Heavy sigh. Then sits down next to them on the bench)

First, let me tell you that I agree with you on some of the things I heard. On the big thing. Enlargement is in crisis. This is obvious to all of us too.

When we started working on the big Central European enlargement in the second half of the 1990s the atmosphere in the EU was very different from today. It was the EU's most ambitious and most visible project. I had a boss who used to say: enlargement is a joint project of EU members and accession countries. Our job in the Commission was *not to judge* accession countries but to help them. We, the Commission, had a mandate from EU members to make enlargement *work*, not to obstruct it. There was trust: in the process, in the Commission, in our assessments.

Today all this has changed. Some member states question everything we do. Huge trust has given way to huge distrust. They suspect us of being cheerleaders for enlargement. Some say we have a bureaucratic interest in the process going ahead at any cost, even if countries are not prepared.

On the other hand: what use is complaining? The Commission cannot achieve anything without member state support, and neither can you. To sit here and say that the world, the EU, member states are all unfair makes you look a bit like those old men in the Muppet Show, sitting on the balcony and commenting on what is happening below.

Today I met so many smart people in your city who have developed the most elaborate theories on why nothing could be done by anyone in particular. Macedonia is world class in the production of theories as to why change is impossible. Just as Bosnia is world class in the production of black humour that first makes you laugh and then leaves you drained.

But note that EU member states are not irrational, most of the time at least. They respond to the most important constituency in any democracy: the voters. They have realised how unpopular enlargement has become. This does not mean that they cannot defend enlargement. But they need arguments, and better ones than they have now.

So ask yourself the most obvious question of all. Would you, if you were a leader in Germany, the Netherlands or the Czech Republic, be in favour of letting seven poor South East European countries with a combined population of 100 million – I include Turkey here – join an EU which is already struggling? Or even just six poor small Balkan countries, where Montenegro, Bosnia, Serbia, Macedonia will each have a seat at the table and a veto on many issues?

Let me simplify this a bit. The French nightmare is Turkey: another big proud arrogant country, all too ready to veto things and to play populist games, a kind of poor United Kingdom only waiting to disagree with Paris and throw its weight around.

Or the German nightmare: 34 EU heads of government sit around the table, everyone with a veto, everyone with the right to speak ... and 8 of them are from the former Yugoslavia plus Albania. And a Council dinner in 2030 at which they are listening to Greek and Macedonian leaders argue over Alexander the Great.

The Estonian nightmare is that at least a few of your small countries will become Russian stooges, undermining EU solidarity and leaving them even more exposed in the East. Or the Dutch nightmare: none of these new members meets any standards or has any real interest in them being met anywhere else in the EU. The nightmare of a rerun of what has already happened to the Council of Europe: overexpansion followed by an erosion of all standards. The Balkanisation of the EU.

For committed Europeans all of these are serious concerns. You realise that with the European arrest warrant the Germans or Dutch are committed to hand over their citizens to Bosnian or Montenegrin or Serbian courts. They worry about your rule of law for good reasons. Your courts will be courts for their citizens as well.

So here is my first recommendation. It is a plea, really: don't make headlines. Disappear from the news for ten years. Stop behaving in any way that reminds people of the old Balkans. Be invisible to the wider European publics. No more contested elections. No more violence. No more boycotts of parliaments. No more symbolic fights over history.

Many in the EU fear that your accession will make an already complicated EU even less manageable. You have to reassure them that you will *not* be causing problems. The first precondition for any future accession is that it will do no harm!

If your leaders are serious, they should get up every morning and say to themselves: Let's not behave in any way that makes us look like leaders of small, post-conflict, corrupt, nationalist and backward Balkan nations. If your voters are serious about the EU, they should only vote for leaders prepared to play this role.

(turns to Vladimir)

You say that the EU is hypocritical because there are also problems in existing EU member states. In fact, most people in Berlin or Paris would agree: "Right. And this is another good reason not to admit any more problematic members any time soon." For you to point to Greece or Bulgaria as examples for low standards is utterly counterproductive. They are in the EU after all and for you to suggest that this was a mistake, and then to ask the EU to make the same mistake again, is shooting yourself in the foot.

You say things are bad in Montenegro, instead of trying to find out what they have done right in Podgorica in recent years. Leaders in Montenegro have, in fact, been totally focused on the accession agenda. They have overcome many suspicions. If things are obviously still imperfect, there is nonetheless a sense in many EU capitals and in Brussels that they will be addressed.

Of course, you are free to put up statues of your heroes. Unfortunately, you might thereby just confirm every prejudice everyone else already has about you. Estonia is today associated with e-government. Macedonia is associated with Alexander statues. Estonia surprised people. You confirmed what they thought.

I just said it: surprise. In addition to being invisible, you need to surprise the rest of Europe positively. This is how Croatia was successful. After its wartime president Franjo Tudjman, a totally isolated leader by the time he died, a man who loved his medieval heroes and funny uniforms and military parades, came leaders who spoke the language of 21st century Europe. Even his former party, the HDZ, surprised everyone by bringing Croatian Serbs into the government in 2003 and then addressing their concerns. They did *not* put up a statue of Tudjman in Zagreb while negotiating. The Croats became boring in the good sense. People elsewhere in Europe forgot the Croatia of the 1990s. And when Croatia had a border conflict with Slovenia Croatian leaders – in government and in the opposition - held their tongue and supported a compromise.

Poland surprised everyone with its radical economic reforms in the 1990s. So did the Baltic states. So did Slovakia after Vladimir Meciar, its autocratic leader, lost office in 1998. So did Bulgaria after 1997 and Romania after 1998. So did the new Serbian government just now on Kosovo. So did Turkey, when the AK party first embraced the EU in 2002. And the reward was, in each case, the opening of accession talks.

However, just one surprise will not be enough. You will need to sustain it. This is where I have fears for Serbia now. This is where Turkey is undoing now whatever it achieved a few years ago.

In fact, after 2001 when you implemented the Ohrid Peace Agreement you did surprise the rest of Europe. It was your wild card. You played it well. But then you stopped surprising. You became what everyone had thought you were from the very beginning: yet another Balkan country with a chip on its shoulder.

How would Macedonia surprise the rest of Europe in the next five years? You referred to ethnic diversity. Well, make this known. In Italy *Macedonia* is a colourful and tasty fruit salad ... play on the theme! Point out that very few countries are as diverse as you are. Make this interesting: only in Macedonia can a visitor go to an Orthodox cathedral, a Dervish teke, a Turkish village, a Roma wedding all in one day. Instead of a VMRO museum displaying guns you could have built a museum to Macedonia's diversity. You say that the Roma community is less discriminated against here than elsewhere in the region? Don't stop there, then: work on becoming a leader on Roma empowerment. If you need donors ask them for help, but be serious and creative. Build a museum to the history of the Balkan Roma in Skopje. Be the Balkan's postmodern nation.

You are good at basketball. Put a new court in every town in the country and become known in the world for your efforts in grooming new talent. You have a wonderful city and amazing nature in Ohrid? Make the most of it! Host international conferences. Start with regular events for young leaders from across the region and Europe. Make sure these are well planned.

Instead of implausible claims about your business climate surprise the world when it comes to education. Define an ambitious ten-year goal for PISA and for foreign language skills. Look to Poland or Estonia how that is done! Be competitive! Make more of the success of the South East European university in Tetovo. Make this the best Albanian-speaking university in the Balkans. And make sure every European leader hears about this. Create a high-level institute for viticulture. Be creative!

Of course, all of this is irrelevant without the basics, the core reforms concerning EU rules and regulations. While you try hard to be boring you work on these for the next few years. I guarantee you: it helps becoming boring and will keep you busy.

And I agree with you: I think the Commission could do much better. We could have precise roadmaps on every policy area where the EU has common rules, laws and standards, similar to the visa liberalisation roadmaps. We could give the same roadmaps to every country, whether it is a candidate or not, whether it is negotiating or not, whether the chapter is “open” or not. We could assess them all in the same way, every year, and thus turn reform into a credible regional race.

Sceptical member states could be invited by the Commission to second experts, to join our assessment missions, as was the case during visa liberalisation. And the Commission would publish the results every year, in every policy field, in its annual progress reports. This it does anyways, only today nobody actually reads these reports. They should be as interesting to read as the regular PISA reports by the OECD. As much quoted. And as gripping!

People and the media love rankings. Let the Commission produce serious ones for serious issues, not gimmicky ones like those the World Bank has produced for the business climate.

This would also address the concerns of many critical EU member states. Concerned about corruption? Let the Commission draw up a strict roadmap for public procurement, based on what is expected from any future EU member. Then give the same roadmap to every accession country. Nobody can say this is unfair. Nobody can complain if this is strict. And then the Commission writes really tough assessments.

Member states worry about mismanagement in the public sector? They should! So let the Commission draw up a strict roadmap for public financial management for all seven countries. And link IPA funding to progress in this area in the next three years.

Member states worry about the quality of national statistics? Let Eurostat and the Commission draw up a detailed roadmap of everything the EU expects from EU members in this field, as detailed and as demanding as possible. And let the Commission reject all statistics not meeting EU standards. I would like to read in the progress report: “we cannot say what the employment rate in Bosnia or Macedonia is this year ... we do not see a rigorous methodology.” Never again should there be any doubt whether Macedonia has 100,000 or 150,000 public employees.

With such rigorous assessments countries would not all be expected to do well in the first year. Or the second. But they should have clear targets for the medium term and be able to prove a track record of reform. And over time, working on this, they will change their reality *and* their image. And all this should end arbitrary “five conditions for Kosovo”, “ten different conditions for Albania”, “three conditions for Turkey;” demanding things from Bosnia that are not demanded from anyone else; or having special detailed action plans for the rule of law in Montenegro but nothing similar for Turkey.

There is enormous virtue in simplicity, not least of all that ordinary people understand the process again. And that it makes it obvious what is fair and what is arbitrary. Concerning every one of these issues the European Commission should provide your leaders – and your publics! – with detailed feedback. Every year, whether you are doing well or badly; and regardless where you stand compared to others in the accession class.

Think of it like this: being allowed to take part in the pre-accession process is like a partial scholarship to the Harvard Business School. You are admitted – and this should in itself fill you with some pride – but you also have to pay a lot yourself. And all this so that you are then required to work long nights, sweat, perform under pressure, with exams to allow a comparison with your peers. And you can fail. There is at first no other reward for it than the process itself. And since all of this is transparent, and the assessment of your performance is easy to understand, outsiders get a clear sense of where you stand. Why do you do this? You do not get paid for it. You do it because it is good for you and your future.

Of course, you might decide to drop out. But if your leaders pretend to go along and do not work, they will be found out. If things move backwards, the Commission will say so. It would have an objective yardstick to measure where you are, compared to the finishing line in each policy field. Such a process should be much stricter, much more transparent ... and much fairer than anything that is currently being done.

And Greece? You have convinced yourself that no compromise is ever possible. You make it far too easy for yourself.

I fully understand that this is not a bargaining process where you can just “meet in the middle.” You have red lines, of course. But ask your government to set out, publicly, what it is prepared to do. As for how to do this in detail: I have my own ideas – I quite like the ESI proposal for the name (see Annex C). Of course a face-saving compromise can be reached. If Germans and Poles, Poles and Ukrainians, Hungarians and Romanians and Croats and Serbs can overcome deep distrust and turn a page, so can you.

(Turns to Estragon)

Now I can imagine what you might say. You might find me naïve. You might say that I should not trust this government or this leader. In fact, I was told the same in Bosnia, where some say this about every politician. And in Turkey. And in Montenegro.

But the European Commission must play the ball, never the player. We can only judge politicians by objective standards, or we lose our credibility.

Instead, help us define red lines on human rights issues that we can apply to everyone who wants to join! Help us define what should be unacceptable. We need better, more plausible ways to define what the red lines should be on media freedom, hate speech, minority rights. We need input from our critics in the region, from civil society. Just do not expect us to interfere in domestic politics. Do not expect us to choose your leaders. Do not attack us if we initially give your leaders the benefit of the doubt. In the end, they will nevertheless have to deliver.

They need to have the ambition. They need to provide the firewood. Pre-accession and our feedback can be the match to light the fire.

In fact, listening to the two of you, and recalling what I heard in critical EU member states, I see interesting common ground. You all say that you want the pre-accession process to be more objective. Indeed: nothing is as demotivating as the sense that assessments are arbitrary, whether in school or in your professional life. Also: nothing creates as much suspicion in EU member states as the sense that the process is incomprehensible, that we – the Commission –

are hiding things. Today few people understand the many reports, the lists of conditions, different for every country, the many standards, vetoes and fora – HLADs, positive agendas, enhanced dialogues and association councils. We need to make this all understandable again. Clear. Transparent. Of course, in the end everything *does* depend on you. The pre-accession process is not for the faint-hearted. And you can fail.

I accept that we – the European Commission – can do better. I wish the next Commission could have listened to you both. Not to agree with you, necessarily. But to understand your concerns. Finally, concerning your discussions about media, I have a very simple and concrete suggestion. There should be a talk show on your public broadcaster where, once a week, live in the evening, the two of you discuss your differences. As openly and respectfully as here.

Look, the sun has set. Is it not time for all of us to finally get up and go somewhere?

ANNEX A – EU-MACEDONIA RELATIONS: TIMETABLE OF HIGHLIGHTS

BOY: Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening,
but surely tomorrow.

- 1991 Macedonia declares its independence
- 1993 Macedonia joins the United Nations
- 1995 Interim Accord between Greece and Macedonia
- 2001 Stabilisation and Association Agreement
Ohrid Framework Agreement ends months of violent ethnic conflict
- 2004 Macedonia submits application for EU membership
- 2005 Macedonia obtains EU candidate status
- 2009 European Commission recommends opening accession talks with Macedonia
- 2010 European Commission repeats its recommendation for the second time
- 2011 European Commission repeats its recommendation for the third time
- 2012 European Commission repeats its recommendation for the fourth time
- 2013 European Commission repeats its recommendation for the fifth time

**ANNEX B – REFERENCES AND SOURCES FOR THE
STONE BRIGE CONVERSATION**

All references on ESI website www.vladimirandestragon.org

ANNEX C – MACEDONIA AND GREECE – ESI NAME PROPOSAL

Macedonia, a country of two million inhabitants in the middle of the Balkan Peninsula, became an independent state in 1991 following the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia. One decade later, in 2001, it signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union. In March 2004 Macedonia submitted an application for EU membership. In November 2005, the European Commission concluded that Macedonia was a functioning democracy with stable institutions, which “broadly guarantee the rule of law and human rights”. That year Macedonia became an official candidate for EU accession.

Since then relations have been stuck. In October 2009 the Commission recommended that EU member states start accession negotiations with Macedonia.⁶ Negotiations did not start, however, as the Greek government insisted that a dispute over the country’s name be settled before. In the following years the Commission repeated its recommendation. In March 2012, the European Parliament pointed out that the decision “not to follow the recommendation of the Commission has triggered legitimate frustration and dissatisfaction in the country’s public opinion.”⁷ In 2013 the European Commission wrote for the fifth year in a row that it “considers that the political criteria continue to be sufficiently met and recommends that accession negotiations be opened.”⁸ It warned that failure to act on this recommendation “calls into question the credibility of the enlargement process, which is based on clear conditionality and the principle of own merits.”⁹ Negotiations have still not begun.

The position of different Greek governments on the name dispute has changed over time. In 1992 Greek governments opposed any reference to “Macedonia” in the name of the northern neighbour. Back then Greek foreign minister Antonis Samaras argued that the name Macedonia is “associated with immense pain and suffering by the Greek people and linked with a deliberate plan to take over parts of our territory that have had a Greek identity for more than 2,500 years.”¹⁰

Three years later, in autumn 1995, Greece and Macedonia concluded an Interim Accord.¹¹ This established diplomatic relations. Greece accepted the use of “Macedonia” as in “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (FYROM) and agreed that:

“Upon entry into force of this Interim Accord, The Party of the First Part [*i.e. Greece*] agrees not to object to the application by or the membership of the Party of the Second Part [*i.e. Macedonia*] in international, multilateral and regional organizations and institutions of which the Party of the First Part is a member.” (Article 11, Interim Accord)

⁶ European Commission, Enlargement Strategy Document, 14 October 2009.

⁷ European Parliament, [Resolution of 14 March 2012 on the 2011 progress report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia](#).

⁸ European Commission, [Commission Staff Working Document – The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2013 Progress Report](#), Brussels, 16 October 2013.

⁹ European Commission, [Commission Staff Working Document – The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2013 Progress Report](#), Brussels, 16 October 2013.

¹⁰ Greece’s Foreign Minister Antonis Samaras to his EPC counterparts in Lisbon on 17 January 1992, published in Aristotle Tziambiris, “Greece, European Political Cooperation and the Macedonian Question”, Oxford, 2000, pp. 218-232, Appendix IV. Accessible here: <http://www.macedonian-heritage.gr/OfficialDocuments/Samaras2.html>.

¹¹ Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, [Interim Accord](#). This formula allowed Macedonia to conclude a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU in 2001 under the name of FYROM and to obtain official EU candidate status in 2005. Greek governments – led first by the centre-left PASOK and then the centre-right New Democracy – were supportive.

Then the Greek position changed. In 2006 foreign minister Dora Bakoyannis explained in New York that “the Hellenic Parliament, under any composition, will not ratify the *accession* of the neighbouring country to the EU and NATO if the name issue is not resolved beforehand.”¹² In 2008 Greece vetoed Macedonian accession to NATO under the name FYROM. In 2009 it went further and opposed even the opening of EU *accession talks* without a final solution to the name dispute.

PS: In 2010 ESI made a proposal how the name dispute might be resolved. A version updated in 2012 is here: <http://www.esiweb.org/rumeliobserver/2012/11/30/skopje-and-athens-can-a-version-of-the-esi-proposal-work/>

1. There is active mediation between both sides which focuses solely on finding a compromise name for the country with a geographical modifier, dealing with the issues of RM NATO accession and the opening of EU accession talks.
2. Greece and RM agree on a compromise name, XYZ, with a geographical modifier. This will immediately replace F.Y.R.O.M. wherever that is currently in use in international relations.
3. Greece commits to allow RM to join NATO under this new provisional name XYZ and an invitation to join NATO is extended.
4. RM changes its constitution to say something like this:

“From the day the Republic of Macedonia joins the European Union the international name of the country will be XYZ, used erga omnes in all languages other than the official languages of the country.”

The promised referendum on EU accession at the end of the negotiation process becomes thereby de facto the real referendum on the name issue (there was no referendum for F.Y.R.O.M., and until accession the new name is used only in place of F.Y.R.O.M.).

Leaders in RM replace one name their citizens do not like (referring to a state that has disappeared decades ago, Yugoslavia) with another name they do not like, both used in the same way.

Neither side loses leverage in the future. If future Greek governments block EU accession of RM or make additional demands judged unacceptable in Skopje this would also delay the entering into force of the core provision of this compromise. Greece shows its EU partners that it remains actively in favour of Balkan enlargement. Greece also keeps its leverage until the very end of the accession process.

¹² [Answer of FM Ms. D. Bakoyannis regarding the FYROM name issue](#), Embassy of Greece, Washington D.C., 29 August, 2006.