

## **Macedonia Eyes Its Future in Antiquity**

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**It is strategically incorrect for Macedonian leaders to elect the past and not the future as the foundation of the new state and its people.**

By Plamen Pantev

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At the end of June 2011, a 12-meter high monument of a warrior on horseback resembling Alexander the Great was erected in the center of the Macedonian capital, Skopje. Domestically, this was another of the government's efforts to purposefully mould the spirit of a nation, looking for sources and roots of national identity deep in ancient history. Regionally, this was one more stumbling block in the bilateral negotiation process between Greece and the Republic over the [use of the name, 'Macedonia'](#) – one with potentially negative repercussions on regional stability in the Balkans.

The reaction of the EU was immediate: the Enlargement Commissioner, [Štefan Füle](#), said that if the Republic of Macedonia continues to act in a way that Greece views as provocative, and fails to make faster progress and get the country 'back to work', it could lose its status as a candidate for EU membership. Essential criteria such as public administrative and judicial reform, more efficient anti-corruption measures and freedom of the media are currently not being fulfilled.

Furthermore, at the last NATO summit meeting in Lisbon in November 2010, the Republic once again did not receive an invitation to formally join the Alliance. The reason was familiar: as in previous years, Greece continued to use its long-standing NATO membership to veto the possibility of Macedonia joining until the naming dispute has been resolved. The issue [had been broached](#) at the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest – but after

Greece's negative reaction to the Republic's proposal, the question of Macedonian membership has not since been featured on the agenda.

### **Macedonian identity – reality mixed with social engineering?**

Linking Macedonians' belief that Alexander the Great has something to do with their national history with the search for identity of their new state illustrates the *modus operandi* of the present political leadership in the area of regional security. A whole range of marble and bronze monuments commemorating significant figures of an invented 'national history' have been sprouting up to disclose the government's concerns that the Macedonian state does not yet possess a clear identity.

The philosophical background to this strategy is known as "Makedonism", a projection of foreign policy that regularly creates problems with each of the Republic's neighbors. With Greece and Bulgaria, tensions surround historic and cultural issues; with Serbia and Bulgaria, contentions abound over churches and religion; with Albania, problems are of an ethnic and nationalistic character.

Until recently, the ideological focus honed in on the Macedonians' authentic Slavonic origin, which brought them closer to their neighboring Serb cousins. But as this approach was not working any longer, a stronger argument was needed to also differentiate them from Bulgarians. Therefore the government then decided it was the specific and 'unique ancient origin' of the Republic that would provide the necessary identity for the 'new' state and its people. The government's shift of focus from more recent 'Slavonic' history back to the realms of antiquity is arguably indicative of the ideological inconsistency of the ruling government.

More tellingly, it also demonstrates the government's lack of objectivity when assessing the past century-and-a-half. This new focus on ancient non-Slavic roots is opportunistically needed to balance – or indeed challenge – the Greek claim that Alexander the Great was of ancient Hellenic origin. The Republic's focus on antiquity intensifies Greek threat perceptions that

the ‘re-appropriation’ of history is just the first step: within this framework, a next logical step could be to make territorial claims. The name issue between the Republic of Macedonia and Greece has for years been interpreted as a ‘silly’ and unexplainable Balkan stubbornness. However, it already bears the signs of a security problem – likely to be exacerbated by the domestic economic, social and political difficulties Greece is facing. A country with serious internal tension, Greece is becoming even more sensitive to external provocation.

### **The way forward**

It is not yet too late for the Republic to change course and use different tactics to improve national self-confidence and encourage patriotic impulses. For this to happen, however, the government must find the courage to rid itself of the obsession that national pride and ‘greatness’ must necessarily be based on the events of antiquity. Political vision is also required if the Republic wishes to create a positive and peaceful future for its people: it needs to modernize, fully integrating Macedonian society, economy and polity into the Euro-Atlantic region.

EU and NATO members in the Balkans will always be supportive of the Macedonian state and people in their drive for EU and NATO membership – but reminders not to pilfer their neighbors’ history, culture and spirituality in the name of engineering their own identity may appear.

The common future is no less pressing a political factor than unsure ancient roots in the shaping of a new state’s identity. The last 20 years have shown how attentive state leaders should be in the Balkans and on Balkan issues, keeping in mind the recurrent conflicts in the region. It is strategically incorrect for Macedonian leaders to elect the past and not the future as the foundation of the new state and its people.

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