

Feb 11 2015

Fatmir Besimi: wire-tapping scandal is taking Macedonia 'in the opposite direction'

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*Better integration among different communities and more equal spending of funds is key to Macedonia's future, the country's Deputy Prime Minister **Fatmir Besimi** says in an exclusive interview with LSEE's Tena Prelec. He talks about the recent [wire-tapping revelations](#), the controversial education reform, freedom of the media, the [Skopje 2014 project](#) and the [naming dispute with Greece](#).*



Macedonian Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs Fatmir Besimi during his visit at the LSE

EAVESDROPPING

Can you give us a comment on the latest developments related to the wire-tapping revelations? How do you respond to those who define the heavy-handed governmental reactions to the initial accusations as authoritarian – do these actions take Macedonia any closer to Europe?

I cannot speculate on the situation as it is not clear yet. What I can say, however, is that these developments will negatively affect Euro-Atlantic integration, as the EC progress report made it clear that there needs to be more cooperation among the parties – while this is taking us in the opposite direction. We need not to lose sight of the real issues at stake in the Euro-Atlantic integration and make sure that the institutions maintain their credibility. In tackling these issues, it is now very important that government institutions and judiciary work independently.

Why did the government decide to issue [two conciliatory announcements](#) (on contract workers' tax increase and education reform) on Monday, for when the opposition announced that the revelations would have been released?

Both measures go in the direction of continuing the dialogue and fostering inclusiveness: this is an aspect where we realised that more efforts should have been made – so we acted upon it. They were both planned – so it is merely a coincidence.

Do you personally believe that wire-tapping private conversations is right?

No, I obviously believe it is not right. I think we need to work hard to meet the demands mentioned in the EC progress reports, which are documents that provide a degree of objectivity. Human rights, rule of law, media freedom and political dialogue are all areas to work on. The privacy of the individual is a fundamental right and needs to be respected. We need to fully comply with the standards that are set out in the progress reports and standards requested by the EU – that is the only way forward.

EDUCATION

Several protests have taken place in Macedonia recently against a proposed reform of the education system. Students and professors have accused the government of not having included stakeholders in the consultation process and raised concerns over the potential impact on the autonomy of universities. How would you respond to this?

The main objective of any education reform is to improve the quality of the system. We have had significant problems with universities and schools issuing certificates and diplomas to students who have not met the required standards so we have to do something to change this.

This reform has a transitional period of three years, during which we could introduce further changes if need be. We mostly want to focus on reforms in primary education and pedagogic universities. Whatever we will go ahead with, however, we will not interfere with the autonomy of universities.

I fully agree, however, that in the transitional period we should have been more inclusive with regard to stakeholders – and, indeed, consider introducing some amendments. I also believe that the period between now and the implementation should be as inclusive as possible.

MEDIA

Macedonia has received strong criticism in respect to freedom of the media, plummeting from 34th (2009) to 123rd (2014) in the world press freedom rankings. The [highly controversial Kezarovski trial](#) has been a key area of concern for the OSCE and the wider public. How is the Macedonian government going to reassure other journalists who want to expose wrongdoing that they will be able to do their job without the fear of repercussions?

I do regret that we are ranked 123rd because it is obviously not good for the country, and not really encouraging for any potential investors. I believe we can do better, and the [EC Progress Report](#) gives us a good list of recommendations that we should follow.



Besimi in conversation with LSEE's Tena Prelec and EUROP's Stuart Brown

We have already started the process of improving transparency by consulting the new legislation concerning the media, as well as including representatives of journalists in the Council for Audiovisual Media Services and the Board of state-owned TV. We are also revising the legislation on defamation, answering the popular demand from journalists to reclassify it, so it can be discussed within the framework of civil, not criminal law. But I absolutely agree that ensuring there is freedom for journalists to discuss problems is of paramount importance here, and we are ready to discuss any potential issues with the media.

SKOPJE 2014

Another controversial issue in Macedonia has been the '[Skopje 2014](#)' project, which has involved erecting monuments to historical figures from the region of Macedonia such as Alexander the Great. Aside from the potential effect on relations with Greece, the project has also been criticised due to its cost. What is the final amount of money that will be spent on it, and when will the final breakdown be published?

I don't know. It was not designed as a single project, as it is being promoted now, but as a set of different projects, each with its own budgets, and decision-makers. If you review our budget, you will not find a simple answer to this question – but it's definitely a lot of money.

Do you think it's too much? Could it have been spent better?

Yes, I think the Skopje 2014 money could have been better spent. We could have used some of these funds on education instead, on schools.

A point of criticism was that the project is pushing all non-ethnic Macedonians out of the city, as the centre has been swamped by statues and other symbols of a very specific understanding of the country's history. As we know, Macedonia is not an ethnically homogeneous country. What is your comment?

I think the key answer here would be inclusiveness. The process, I agree, was not inclusive enough. Even though in some parts of Skopje the majority are Macedonian, if a city is a capital, it should represent all of its citizens, including those who do not belong to any particular group. It should be a symbol of the whole country, and give a clear indication that it represents all communities living there. I genuinely believe the Skopje 2014 money could have been spent in a better way, and that the project could – and should – have been more inclusive. Better integration among different groups and more equal spending of funds is key.

What do you think of the decision to name Skopje airport after Alexander the Great?

Well, we have in Macedonia streets named after Churchill, Thatcher... It does not mean that we're trying to take over your history, or in this case, the history of Hellenic culture. It's all about the context.

This row over the airport name, however, does not help in resolving the name issue. Personally, I don't think that if we use the names of Alexander, Plato or Aristotle, we are provoking Greece or claiming this to be exclusively our heritage. During this

period of negotiation over the name issue, however, we may need to be more careful if we indeed want to solve the problem.

We're promoting Hellenic values and Hellenic heritage, and it's quite clear that back then nations, as we understand them now, did not exist. There is no harm in promoting these values today, as different nations, but it's all about the context: if Greece says they see it as a provocation or problem, we should be careful and listening. We need them at the table.

NAME DISPUTE

New Tsipras government in Greece: how do you think this will influence the name dispute? What would you like Tsipras to do as next step in this regard? And what do you think the next step by Macedonia should be?

I think it is too early to say anything about the position of the new Greek government relating to the name issue. But I think it is a reasonable expectation to continue with the dialogue: it is very important that both sides are constructively committed to reaching a solution. Even though I know that the Greek government has other priorities right now, I hope they will bring soon this issue in their agenda.

We talked a lot about problems, but what is it that Macedonia needs to be proud of, and what would it be bringing to the EU?

We should be proud of the diversity and tolerance we are showing, especially inter-religious tolerance. It is an increasingly sensitive issue in the rest of Europe, and we can serve as a proof that liberal concepts and moderate, sensitive approach give a fair chance that different groups can co-exist without major problems.

Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of LSEE Research on SEE, nor of the London School of Economics.

Dr Fatmir Besimi is a Macedonian politician and economist of Albanian ethnicity, currently serving as Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs. He is a member of the executive committee of the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), Macedonia's largest ethnic Albanian party, participating in the government coalition with VMRO-DPMNE.

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