A Response to the Interview with Mr. Gjorge Ivanov, President of the Republic of Macedonia

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In his interview, President Ivanov—as might be expected—focuses on Macedonia’s successes in its efforts to build a civil society in the face of daunting obstacles. As he rightly notes, “Macedonia is one of the few countries in the region that has achieved a model of integration without assimilation.” For the president, who has been a champion of civil society, a scholar and founder of the Macedonian political science association, this must be a particular source of pride.

President—Professor—Ivanov traces the political path that has led Macedonia to this point: the election of 1990, the first step toward independence, in which VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for National Unity) was victorious but unable to form a government, to the most recent elections in March and April of this year, when Ivanov, running on the IMRO ticket, decisively won the presidential election while IMRO captured a majority (56 of 84) of the municipal assemblies. In this 20-year period, several events stand out. These turning points, in turn, help to explain why Macedonia, although deeply divided along ethnic lines (only 64% of the population is Macedonian while 25% is Albanian), has survived an attack on its integrity (in 2001), and gone on to form coalition governments in which both major Albanian parties have, at one time or another, taken part.

The first of these events was, certainly, the transformation of VMRO-DPMNE from a nationalist party with roots in Bulgarian designs on Macedonia, to what is now described (by some) as a ‘moderate’ right wing ‘Christian Democratic’ type of party. At its Kicevo congress in 1995, VMRO-DPMNE initiated this change. It remains unclear how far this transformation has progressed, but it is beyond dispute that VMRO-DPMNE has survived,
and even gained popularity with its Macedonian base, in coalitions, not always smooth, with the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA).

The second decisive moment for Macedonia was clearly the end of civil violence—an uprising of Albanians—and the imposition of the Ohrid Agreement by the International Community, a breakthrough of immense benefit to the Albanian community. The agreement brought benefits to the Albanians that would hardly have been possible without international involvement and pressure. In effect, the Ohrid Agreement functions as a second constitutional document, somewhat akin to the role played by the Dayton Accords in Bosnia Hercegovina.

Finally, and to simplify matters somewhat, I may point to the victory of the opposition in 2002 after a VMRO victory in 1998. The 2002 election demonstrated that Macedonia was not destined to remain a one party state, and in so doing, confirmed the democratic path the country had chosen in 1990.

These events, among others, have helped to create a relatively stable political environment in Macedonia. At the same time, there is much that remains unclear or uncertain. Macedonia is blocked from participation in the EU and NATO by Greece, which has prolonged the dispute over the country’s name far beyond any necessary limits. The two major Albanian parties have not pulled back on demands that Albanian become a second national language, and demands that Macedonia be transformed into a ‘federal’ state have vocal support among a minority of Albanians, especially students. Finally, I may point to the fact that the ‘Macedonian way’ is difficult to describe or define, and is far from meeting the criteria of a civil society. In what is perhaps the most interesting part of President Ivanov’s interview, he emphasizes that the Macedonian model of development is unique. The question remains, then, in what respect this is the case.

The president suggests, at the start of his interview, that “Macedonia is one of the few countries in the region that has achieved a model of integration without assimilation” and adds that the “complexity of the Ottoman Empire is still present in Macedonian society,” attributing a tradition of tolerance to the influence of the Millet system. Later in his interview he suggests that Macedonia has created standards which represent an “open system,” which he suggests stands as “a new model of integration of human rights.” Yet, he also makes it clear that “Macedonia is still a unitary state.”

These brief remarks reveal, indeed, how unique the Macedonian way is, but also its vulnerabilities: the challenge, which is still voiced in peaceful terms, to the notion that Macedonia is a unitary state; the confusion over Macedonia’s