

Interview of Dr. Ognyan Minchev by Macedonian daily Nova Makedonija – original version (10/05/2012)

1. Can you please comment the results of the elections in Serbia and Greece and how do you think they will react on the global political situation on the Balkans ?

The two elections have sent opposite messages. Serbian voters have practically re-elected their government – they've cast their vote for the status quo and for stability, even if a strong message of fatigue and even desperation from the political class is felt among the Serbian public. The campaign before the elections was evidently less focused on Kosovo than previous campaigns, which is a sign of gradual marginalization of the Kosovo issue as a topic of public debate.

The results of the Greek elections are really dramatic. They have produced a 'hung Parliament', where status quo parties – *Nea Demokratia* and *PASOK* - got an aggregate of only 30 per cent of the vote. The lion's share of Greek votes went in favor of anti-systemic parties – ultra-left and ultra-right – in proportions which make the formation of a new government highly unlikely. Anti-systemic parties hold a majority, united only by their rejection of the austerity measures pact signed by previous Greek governments with Brussels. The most likely outcome will be new elections next month which could produce even more desperate blockade of the party-political system.

While electoral results in Serbia send a message of stability and predictability to the outer world, which is positive for the entire Western Balkan region, Greek election deepened the vicious circle of public anger, blocking any attempt of crisis management.

2. What is your opinion and professional expertise on the general situation in Europe and what do you think in what direction the situation can develop in the coming months?

Europe faces the deepest crisis since its very establishment as a community and later – as a Union of nations. The financial crisis of 2008 went beyond the monetary disputes and developed as a full blown crisis of the EU institutional system. Crisis means a (partial) disintegration of the existing structure, a turbulent period of chaotic movement before a new structure shapes up. The EU faces the need to choose between two polarized options in its future institutional structuring: first, to strengthen its federal tendencies and establish more centralized decision making on budgetary, financial and Schengen issues. Second – to re-nationalize sovereignty and responsibility in key issues of European integration, moving to a state of loose customs union and free trade zone. It is important to see that both options have strong supporters among EU members, which will probably lead the EU into a direction of uneasy balance between the two polar options. We may soon see the formation of a strong nucleus of several EU members, strengthening their integration in most monetary, political and security issues, keeping the common currency and surrounded by circles and regions of looser integration around this nucleus. This is bad news for the Balkans, because few, if any, Balkan countries will be able to qualify for the criteria to join the EU nucleus. We would

rather be marginalized as a region into a periphery of the European integration space. It is urgent for all Balkan countries to try and address this challenge in a coordinated manner and take care of their common interest rather than focus on the everlasting agenda of regional tensions and controversies.

3. Do you believe that the actual political situation in Greece can encourage a crisis in the Balkans and if it does, what do you think should be the answer for this country to get out of the crisis?

There are no immediate threats from the Greek crisis to the rest of the Balkans. At some point a shake up in the Greek banking system may have implications on its neighbors but it's early to predict when and to what extent that might happen. The Greek crisis deepens the general negative attitudes in the West of Europe about further enlargement of the EU to the East and to the South. It becomes evident that states with weak institutional systems could not play a responsible role of equal partners in the Union and need stronger monitoring and control on behalf of Brussels. This fact tends to establish a hierarchy of EU member states, which serves the option of double- or multi-track Europe, divided into a strong and integrated nucleus, surrounded by looser networks of partners.

Greece could hardly get out of its crisis through a radical denial of its debt duties and the need to serve them. National consensus is the ultimate instrument to manage and overcome such a crisis. What we see in Greece instead is disintegration – political, corporate, civilian and institutional disintegration *vis-à-vis* the need to take responsibility for the situation. We do not know how deep this crisis could get and what could be the way out of the crisis. I hope Greece will be able to preserve its democratic political system on its way out of the crisis.

4. From time to time in history there are disputes on different matters (like historical or political matters) between Macedonia and Bulgaria. Can these two countries find a compromise or a solution on these matters?

We have already developed the experience of independent relationships between Bulgaria and Macedonia in the last 20 years and we could more easily define and predict the opportunities and the limitations in the bi-lateral relations. On the positive side we share a common future in the EU and in NATO – when Macedonia will be ready to remove the obstacles to this double membership. We're also destined to participate in a multilateral regional dialogue in order to get better common chances of development and prosperity within the European integration infrastructure.

Most Bulgarians also know that Bulgaria could do little, if anything, to remove the impediments of historical and political nature between Sofia and Skopje in observable future. Macedonia is in its quest for identity and every single day we learn about new dimensions of this identity search. Macedonian nationalist identification quest needs enemies as arguments for its legitimacy. Bulgaria is historically closest to Macedonians – therefore it serves as the most important enemy in shaping up Macedonian identity. There's nothing to do about it – some time should pass before things change. What could we do as Bulgarians? To change forcefully again the nationality of our compatriots around the Pirin mountains – as communists did in 1947? Should we officially recognize half of our history as Macedonian history? Those would be useless steps – we cannot pacify the nationalist quest for enemies to the Macedonian identity... Not today... Probably – later!

Have you seen the 'Schindler List' movie? It is a story about a good German man, who saved a number of Jews in the Second World War. I've watched several Macedonian movies on the Second World War lately – there is not a single good or even normal Bulgarian there. All Bulgarians are monsters. There is one positive effect out of this sad story – present day Bulgarians are in the process of completely losing their illusions about Macedonia. Those illusions were accumulated for more than a century after our Liberation in 1878 and now they wither away – hopefully opening a space for reasonable expectations and pragmatic policies for the future.

5. Next week in Chicago there will be a summit of NATO countries in which there are expectations that Macedonia should join the Alliance. Knowing the problem about the name issue with Greece, do you think our country will be accepted in the North-Atlantic Alliance?

I really do not know. A compromise should be reached for that to happen. It is unlikely that Greece will be able to offer a compromise in its present state of turmoil – there's nobody to take responsibility for such a compromise today, even if someone is willing to do it. In order to avoid a veto from Greece a membership under 'temporary name' could be considered, which I presume will not be acceptable for Macedonia. Postponing Macedonia's membership is dangerous – the inter-communal situation in Macedonia is tense again and your country badly needs more guarantees for its security and stability. One thing is for sure – the membership of Macedonia in NATO is beneficial for the entire Balkan region's security and stability, and I hope this membership is coming soon.