

THE MAN WHO HELD THE LINE

Nikola Dimitrov — Former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister of North Macedonia

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Nikola Dimitrov in his study in Skopje. The city stretches behind him, a landscape he helped shape.

"My life is more than providing something to myself and my family."

That is how Dimitrov described his motivation for entering the political sphere. The holder of a vast and distinguished résumé — advocating for human rights,

fighting corruption, serving in both national and international political roles — this son of Macedonia, with a master's degree from England and a tenure as his country's ambassador to the United States during the George W. Bush era, among dozens of other achievements, seems tireless in his pursuit of equity. A member of a coalition that no longer exists — one of moderate democrats who believed in the unity of minorities — he remains an unconditional champion of diversity and continues to move hearts that have not forgotten what he did.

"Dimitrov! Now there was a good one!" Hands raised to the sky, voice full of life, eyes brimming with sincerity — as if speaking of a demigod, a hero, a Hercules. That is how I first encountered this man, before ever having met him, through the words of a taxi driver on my way from the airport to the hotel in Skopje.

I stayed in the city centre and walked through the streets, admiring with wonder the living cultural pulse that simmers through the city. Like any self-respecting tourist, I was filming and taking photos, when something drew my gaze. I spotted him walking alongside his wife, and felt the quiet frenzy of the people around me — whispers of "look, there he is." At the time, I had no idea who he was, let alone that we were heading to the same place. Without internet access, I tried to find the restaurant; five warm-hearted Macedonians pointed me in the right direction, arguing cheerfully among themselves. I laughed. I followed what seemed most logical, and turning into one of the charming, centuries-old streets of this beautiful capital, I found the man again. He was dressed with elegant simplicity — monochromatic suits, understated, light, happy. He smiled, but not the way politicians smile. He smiled like a human being. He carried no weight on his shoulders, and only when he spoke of his land did his voice truly come alive. He loves his country. As he walks, subtle reactions appear among passersby — a smile, a nod, a brief glance of recognition. The quiet respect reserved for someone whose work shaped the country's history.

At that first encounter, I heard him introduce the current Prime Minister — as a gentleman, I must say. He opened the dinner speech prepared for the select group of German industry leaders, thanking us for visiting Skopje — as if being in such a beautiful place were somehow an effort. "Despite having essentially opposing sides in politics and belonging to rival groups in parliament, we are all united for the good of the country. I leave you in the company of our Prime Minister, currently the most popular politician in North Macedonia." The Prime Minister took the microphone. Dimitrov sat down in front of me, and I could not stay silent: "Good job." He glanced sideways — just enough for me to catch his smile — and quietly said, "Thank you." It was only the following day that I finally got to hear what this man truly had to say.



Dimitrov walks through the old bazaar district of Skopje. Subtle reactions appear among passersby — a smile, a nod, a brief glance of recognition.

A Country Built on Difficult Choices

"Meritocracy is something I have always believed in. We worked for three years to ensure that medical students — and I mean the best ones — had access to the best, best-paying jobs, without depending on ties to the government or any politician."

And with that, he wove into his speech the fact that corruption is one of the key factors driving hundreds of young people to seek their futures outside of North Macedonia. That same day, his wife Katerina put it plainly: "Clientelism and corruption are the defining factors pushing our young people to leave the country."

Dimitrov holds a conviction that seems to be shared in near-perfect unison: accession to the European Union would change the course of things. He worked hard toward that goal. It was under his leadership that the path to security began to be forged, and it was during his tenure that North Macedonia became a member of NATO. "My destiny was always to deal with complicated issues." When he took up his post as ambassador to the United States during the Bush era, he was still a young man — young enough that the American president could not resist a joke: "What are you going to do when you grow up, son?" To which the young man replied, "I'm going to be president, Mr. President." And in a political system where real power rests with the Prime Minister, this prophetic young man did indeed make the earth tremble. The country today has secure borders, thanks to agreements he signed. He handled the issues of ethnic and religious minorities with mastery, and the discourse now adopted by the current government was built upon his policies and ideas.

He has faced difficult decisions. Once, he had to choose between sending troops to stop Albanians at the border or handling the matter through parliament. "If you use force to go against them, you can lose the supporters from the Albanian community inside Macedonia — but if you don't, you risk splitting the country and letting the conflict come through our borders." And that was not the only time he prevented a social rupture.



SKOPJE

Skopje at dusk. The Kale Fortress overlooks the Vardar River and a city caught between its past and its future.

Europe's Grey Zone

"In the Bulgarian narrative, we are, as a country, a complete mistake." And it is precisely this kind of conflict that keeps the country from the European integration it so deeply desires. Europeans still resist, because they require consensus — and most of them are, above all, pragmatic nations. If making decisions among 27 is already difficult, imagine adding five or six more that are driven by emotion. This thinking does not transpire with the clarity it deserves, and more and more concessions are made on the Balkan side, to an insatiable Europe that never ceases to demand.

There is a problem, however, in the dialectic of the matter: Europe needs unity, and Macedonians are European by continental origin. They were here, after all, long before Clovis and the Germanic tribes — so nothing could be more natural than joining our neighbours. With three official religions, a language disputed and claimed by Bulgaria, a flag and a name that Greece insists are its own property, this people needs union. Joining the EU would guarantee the stability of an entire buffer zone that would close Europe into a cohesive, viable bloc to the edges of Asia. But there are so many issues dividing this fractured, polarised Europe — paralysed by the fear of immigration — that North Macedonia's candidacy has now been waiting 25 years for an answer that never comes.

"We are a grey zone in the yellow and blue flag. We are a corridor to the EU for many refugees — they manage to flee as far as Greece, and many are simply expelled; they pass through our borders and re-enter Europe again. So being part of the block makes a lot of sense."

This piece, up to this point, carries a clear purpose. We intend to speak with him — to invite him to the Kin studio, to hear this powerful voice that helped make Macedonia great. Because politics is everything; it is what moves the pieces to make the world a more fair place. And to hear from someone who lives the issues that migration and conflict bring firsthand, offers us a new perspective — from outside Europe, yet from the very heart of the Continent.

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