

Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar  
European and Eurasian Affairs  
Interview with 360 Degrees  
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360 Degrees: Mr. Escobar, thank you for this interview and the opportunity to discuss with you following the meetings you had in Skopje today. This is your first visit to North Macedonia. What messages did you convey at the meetings with the government leadership?

DAS Escobar: First of all, thank you for the opportunity to be on your program. The purpose of the visit was threefold. First, I wanted to give the government my personal thanks and the thanks of the Administration for the strong commitment that North Macedonia has to NATO. It's a real partnership, one where North Macedonia does a lot of contributions and one where I hope that we can deepen our cooperation.

Second, I wanted to express the United States' and this Administration's support for your candidacy in the European Union. We hope that that can happen very quickly and you have our full support for that. Third, based on the existing cooperation that we already have with North Macedonia, I wanted to explore with the government options for deepening the relationship. To expand the relationship to be more robust in terms of economic investment, cultural, educational, agricultural, and every other kind of cooperation aside from just the military to military and the political strategic relationship.

360 Degrees: You mentioned NATO, the EU. First, about NATO, it was recently announced that North Macedonia has completed its military integration into NATO. A dilemma that is often raised here is whether our Army, with its size and equipment, can be a beneficial partner to the other Allies?

DAS Escobar: That's right. In fact, it already is. Let's remember that NATO is predominantly a political union. So that means it is a union of countries that have not just common interests, but shared values. It is those values that are important in NATO being a really important instrument for bolstering democracy, for promoting rule of law, and for encouraging reform. So in that regard, North Macedonia serves as an excellent example for future members.

360 Degrees: On several occasions there have been messages coming in from various levels in the U.S. Administration that the U.S. supports the start of EU accession talks for North Macedonia, but as we all know, this has not happened due to the blockade from Bulgaria. Is U.S. diplomacy involved in facilitating the dialogue between Sofia and Skopje in order to find a resolution and thus unblock the process?

DAS Escobar: I want to start with the message that North Macedonia deserves to be part of the European Union. You are culturally, historically, and increasingly economically part of Europe. You should have a seat at the table. Additionally, you've made some very, very good reforms that qualify you to start the process. So, we're working very closely with our European partners, all our European partners, to ensure that that happens very soon. It was our hope, and it continues to be our hope that you can start the intergovernmental conferences this year, and if not this year, as soon as possible next year. So the answer is yes, we are in constant communication with all of our European partners on this.

360 Degrees: At the press event following the meeting with Minister Omani, a journalist asked whether Mr. Escobar is going to Sofia following Skopje?

DAS Escobar: The answer is no. After this, I am going to Bosnia for the Peace Implementation Conference. After that I'm going to Tirana, again to signal our support for the European Union membership. Then, after that, I'm going to London to meet with the new UK Special Rep who is convening the Foreign Ministers of the Western Balkans in a way to map out the future of how our cooperation will work in the Western Balkans. All of those are positive developments for the region. All of those, we hope that [North] Macedonia will be a full partner in helping us move forward. And I don't exclude that at some point I will visit other parts of Europe where we have important issues to discuss.

360 Degrees: I want to refer to the statement you made at the press event, in which, speaking about the need for a swift start of EU accession talks, you said you welcomed the readiness for flexibility. Can you clarify?

DAS Escobar: What I mean by that is we are very supportive of every effort that you've made to do what's necessary to start the process. You've made reforms, you have signaled your intent to do everything necessary, and on top of that, this government expressed a strong support, a strong strategic vision for being a member of the European Union, and we continue to support that.

360 Degrees: Do you have a comment on the recent and ongoing developments in the internal political scene in North Macedonia? [PM] Zaev announced his resignation, there was an attempt to bring down the government, there are currently negotiations to consolidate the parliamentary majority...

DAS Escobar: Our partnership with North Macedonia is with its people and its institutions. So our hope is that the next government, like this government, can maintain its strong pro-NATO commitment and a strong Euro-Atlantic focus. So we're hoping that any government will have that, and as long as that government has that, they have our full support.

360 Degrees: Internally, for North Macedonia and its citizens, the main issues continue to be corruption, rule of law, and the need for an efficient and independent judiciary. What would be your message in this regard, bearing in mind the commitment of President Biden to fight corruption globally, as the key interest for U.S. national security?

DAS Escobar: It is, and as you know, corruption is deeply damaging and corrosive to democracies. North Macedonia's been a great example on multiethnic harmony, on establishing a pattern of deepening Euro-Atlantic ideals. So the fight against corruption is one that we all have constantly. Not only within our borders but around our borders. So I encourage the government of North Macedonia – this one, the next one, all governments – to continue the fight against corruption. And by the way, it is corruption that is leading to the migration of people outside of the Balkans. So the sooner we work to resolve this issue, the more healthy both the economy and the democracy will be in this country.

360 Degrees: I also want to ask you about the main challenges in the region: Bosnia-Herzegovina, the dialogue between Belgrade and Prishtina. What is your assessment, can there be progress on these issues soon?

DAS Escobar: In order to answer both of those questions, we have to talk about the context in which we're dealing with them. The important thing for the public to know is that this Administration doesn't look at the Balkans through the lens of the 1990s, that is, through the political problems. The reality, the real story of the Balkans is the phenomenal economic growth and the phenomenal economic opportunities that exist here.

If you look at where we are 25 years later, out of the former Yugoslavia and the former area of the Western Balkans we now have three NATO countries that we call Allies as well as friends. The economy is growing at an average rate of about seven percent. The region offers tremendous opportunities for energy, shipping, transportation, renewables, and even IT. So it is this regional economic integration that is transforming the Balkans into a really exciting place to be, to be able to look at the political questions and the economic questions. This is where North Macedonia is going to help us resolve the problems, not just in your country but in the region.

So yes, I do think in the context of this regional integration that there are great opportunities to resolve the issues of Serbia and Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and we're going to be looking to North Macedonia to contribute to the resolution of those problems as well.

360 Degrees: In what way?

DAS Escobar: First of all, you are a tremendous example of inter, multiethnic harmony. You're a great example of peacefully and effectively integrating into Euro-Atlantic institutions. And you're also a model of free, fair, and peaceful elections. So we need you to export that.

360 Degrees: Interesting. Are you coming back soon?

DAS Escobar: I would like to. In my next visit, I would like to do more in working with Chambers of Commerce, businesses, entrepreneurs, students, and civil society. Now, I'm making this trip because it was the only opportunity I could make before the end of the year, and as I said, it was important for this Administration to make a statement in support of your Euro-Atlantic aspirations. But in my next visit, I promise to meet with more people and get a broader sense of what North Macedonia is.

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