

MACEDONIA IN NATO: WHAT HAS CHANGED?

Macedonia has reached its long desired strategic goal to become a full NATO member state in March 2020. This article sheds light on the peculiarities associated with the accession process of this small and impoverished country, and the unique criteria it had to fulfill in order to finally achieve its desire to join NATO. The key questions that are addressed include the following: Does Macedonia's membership bring peace and progress to the troublesome region? What does membership mean in terms of internal cleaveages, especially concerning socio-economic and inter-ethnic difficulties? The key premise is that NATO membership would not enhance the country's transformation to the better; membership came at too high a cost, which may instigate an even greater instability.

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Surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have brought good news for North Macedonia (hereafter in the text, Macedonia), at least with regard to its international position. On 27 March 2020, the instrument of ratification of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was deposited through the US Embassy in Skopje into the State Department. Following a video meeting with Ambassador Philip T. Reeker, the Acting Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikola Dimitrov triumphantly announced that the country officially became the Alliance's 30th member state, and congratulated the citizens on their success, as well as the visionaries, diplomats, and soldiers involved in achieving "this strategically important national goal."¹ What was supposed to be a great strategic victory and reason for joy for the citizens of this small and poor country in the European periphery remained merely a virtual event: A mere gun salute was fired in Skopje while Macedonian citizens continued to quarantine. It is hard to say how enthusiastic any real celebrations would have been under other/normal circumstances, as the government had already celebrated joining NATO a number of times before the act, exploiting the success in order to sugarcoat other deficiencies.²

Macedonia's Path to NATO

Had it not been because of the "name dispute",³ Macedonia's story about its path to NATO would have been an ordinary one. A newly independent, post-socialist country since 1991, Macedonia officially expressed its wish to join NATO in 1993, was admitted to Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1995, and in 1999, submitted its first Membership Action Plan. The relationship with the Alliance was always marked by

¹ "North Macedonia officially becomes the 30th NATO member," *European Western Balkans*, 27 March 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/03/27/north-macedonia-officially-becomes-30th-nato-member/>
#:~:text=SKOPJE%20%2F%20WASHINGTON%20%E2%80%93%20Today%2C%20North,Skopje%20into%20the%20State%20Department

² The first event took place in mid-July 2018 (i.e., a month after signing the controversial agreement for the name change). In 15 cities as many as 40 artists were engaged to celebrate the alleged invitation to join NATO. The events that cost 180,000 euros were poorly attended. "Macedonia celebrates the invitation to join NATO," *AP*, 14 July 2018, <https://apnews.com/0934de049b1c49758cc6c41fe79acf87/Macedonia-celebrates-the-invitation-to-join-NATO>; In February 2019, ahead of the change of the Constitution and the state name, there was another ceremony of raising a NATO flag at the main government building, as the members of the alliance were still to ratify the accession agreement. See: "Macedonia raises NATO flag ahead of name change," *ABC News*, 12 February 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/macedonia-raises-nato-flag-ahead-change-61014786>. At last, the NATO flag was raised in front of the parliament building after ratification of the NATO accession protocol, prior to the final say of the Spanish parliament.

³ Ever since 1991, when it gained independence from federal Yugoslavia, Macedonia was enforced to deal with a unique and unprecedented problem in the history of international relations over its right of self-naming and self-determination. Namely, according to Athens, the name Macedonia implied Skopje's irredentist aspirations. Both EU and UN defined it as a security problem, while a bizarre reference (the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) was imposed on it as an additional criteria for admission to the UN. For more on the name dispute see: Mircela Dzuvalakovska Casule et al (ed.), *The Name Issue Revisited. An Anthology of Academic Articles* (Skopje: MIC, 2012); A. Heraclides, *To Makedoniko Zitima 1878–2018: Apo tis ethnikes diekdikiseis stis syngrousiakes ethnikes taftitites* [The Macedonian Question 1878–2018: From national claims to conflicting national identities] (Athens: Themelio, 2018); S. Skaric, D. Apasiev, and V. Patchev (eds.), *The Name Issue – Greece and Macedonia* (Skopje: Matica Makedonska, 2009).

close cooperation; Macedonia deployed troops in support of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan from 2002 until late 2014, and is currently supporting the follow-on Resolute Support mission to train, advise, and assist Afghan security forces.

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Although it meant taking a side in the delicate regional puzzle between Serbia and Kosovo, the Macedonian government was a key partner in supporting NATO-led operations in Kosovo in 1999, as well as in providing logistical support to the Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission. Macedonia even hosted over 360,000 refugees from Kosovo (as much as 18 percent of its population)⁴—far over its capacities.⁵ Then Foreign Minister Stevo Crvenkovski expected a swift reward—full membership—for these efforts to no avail. The NATO intervention was a catalyst factor for the implosion of inter-ethnic contradictions between the majority ethnic community (65 percent Macedonians) and the biggest ethnic minority (25 percent Albanians).⁶ The six-month internal conflict that had taken place in 2001 was concluded by signing a peace agreement (Ohrid Framework Agreement) that was mediated by the US, NATO, and the EU. With the agreement’s provisions, the political system turned into a hardly functional bi-ethnic power-sharing model.⁷

Unable to deliver and meet any electoral promise, the Macedonian governments put all their efforts into NATO and EU integration. The narrative for the electorate was simple. Once the country is integrated, wellbeing will encompass citizens. No wonder Macedonia quickly joined the so-called Alliance of the Willing in Iraq in 2004, showing clearly that it wanted to be more loyal to Washington than to Brussels. The

⁴ Richard C. Hall (ed.), *War in the Balkans. An Encyclopedic History from the Fall of Ottoman Empire to the Breakup of Yugoslavia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2014), p. 179.

⁵ At the peak of the refugee crisis, international community had strongly criticized the Macedonian authorities for the alleged mismanagement, but Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski lashed out at NATO, saying the alliance had ignored warnings that airstrikes on FR Yugoslavia could trigger a humanitarian crisis. See: “Macedonians move more refugees to NATO-run camps,” *CNN*, 7 April 1999, <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/europe/9904/07/kosovo.refugees.01/index.html>

⁶ Francesco Strazzari, *Kosovo 1999–2000, The Intractable Peace. A Radiography of the Post-War Year* (Florence: European University Institute, 2000).

⁷ Biljana Vankovska, “The Role of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the Peace Process in Macedonia” in Stefano Bianchini et al (eds.), *Regional Cooperation, Peace Enforcement, and the Role of the Treaties in the Balkans* (Ravenna: Longo Editore Ravenna, 2007).

2008 Bucharest Summit was more than symbolic, since the US President George W. Bush announced that Macedonia, together with Albania and Croatia, would receive an invitation to join NATO. A day later, the decision was vetoed by Greece. The Alliance stood behind its member state but it took a trial before the International Court of Justice to prove that Greece was responsible for breaching the 1995 Interim Agreement that stated that Macedonia (then FYROM) would not be prevented by Greece from joining international organizations under the UN reference.⁸ The Declaration of Strategic Partnership and Cooperation between the US and the Republic of Macedonia⁹ was a weak consolation prize for what had been felt as a gross historic injustice. In time of national disillusionment, the government led by the conservative Nikola Gruevski (in coalition with Albanian partner, Ali Ahmeti) made a U-turn to strengthen its internal rule by using a identity policy of looking backwards to one's historical roots and symbols. Military expenditures dropped,¹⁰ and foreign policy started involving other world powers such as Russia, China, and Turkey. The Gruevski regime was toppled down through protests, known as the Colorful Revolution, which opened the door for the more cooperative government of the Social Democrat Zoran Zaev. As for Ali Ahmeti, he remained untouchable, and played the role of kingmaker.

Overcoming the Last Obstacle: The Prespa Agreement Miracle

It seemed as if the Balkans and Europe were experiencing an *annus mirabilis* in 2018. Thanks to the Prespa agreement (PA),¹¹ Skopje, Athens, and European and US officials could all congratulate themselves. The two Balkan states manifested maturity in dispute-solving through a compromise, while Brussels and Washington seemingly assisted only diplomatically to bring the 27-year-long dispute to an end. The agreement was supposed to open Macedonia's path to NATO and EU membership—that is, to give impetus to ongoing integrative processes, and to subsequently set a good example for other countries in the region, especially Serbia and Kosovo. The President put it explicitly: NATO membership is not a consolation, but is the main prize.¹² And he got it right for one simple reason: The Prespa process was never meant to bring (now North) Macedonia close to the EU. It had been on the

⁸ ICJ, “Application of the Interim Accord of 13 September 1995 (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia v. Greece),” <https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/142/judgments>

⁹ Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, “Declaration of Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Between the United States of America and the Republic of Macedonia,” *US Department of State*, 7 May 2008, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/104441.htm>

¹⁰ Trading Economics, “Macedonia Military Expenditure,” <https://tradingeconomics.com/macedonia/military-expenditure>

¹¹ The full name of the agreement reads: “Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences as Described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), The Termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Parties,” 13 June 2018, <https://vlada.mk/mkrgdogovor>

¹² Sanja Ljubisavljevic, “Pendarovski za RTS: Vredelo je promeniti ime Makedoniji zbog ulaska u NATO” [Pendarovski for RTS: It was worthwhile change the name of Macedonia in exchange for NATO membership], *RTS*, 1 November 2019, <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/ci/story/3/region/3720260/pendarovski-za-rts-vredelo-je-promeniti-ime-makedoniji-zbog-ulaska-u-nato.html>

West’s geopolitical agenda ever since US State Secretary John Kerry told the Senate’s Foreign Affairs Committee in February 2015 that “Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Macedonia are the new front line between Russia and the West.”¹³ The persistence of the absurd name dispute became a nuisance that could not be tolerated anymore. The “solution” to the name dispute has been motivated by geopolitical “urgency” (i.e., a need to solidify NATO on the Balkan “frontline” in the context of Second Cold War prospects). The fast-track dispute resolution effort (which in the process caused a collateral damage in values such as rule of law, democratic principles, and human rights) indeed made Macedonian territory a legitimate part of NATO.

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Behind the façade, the PA narrative is not as successful as presented by the political narrative, especially in terms of societal/identity security. The entire Prespa process cast a shadow over the country’s intra-Macedonian—rather than its inter-ethnic—relations. In the summer of 2018, the government of Zoran Zaev urged citizens to vote “yes” on the question: “Do you support EU and NATO membership by accepting the agreement between Macedonia and Greece?” Even the advocates of the name change noticed that the very fact that the poll did not even include the country’s new proposed name—Republic of North Macedonia—had been telling.¹⁴ The referendum on the agreement held on 30 September 2018 failed due to an organized boycott movement. The State Electoral Commission declared it did not meet the constitutional requirement of a 50 percent plus one turnout—less than 37 percent of the electorate cared to vote. Nevertheless, Zaev’s government got the green light to change the constitution using a mixture of “Balkan and European methods”, or as EU commissioner Hanh suggested, a “combination of the Balkan and rational approach.”¹⁵

The PA’s consequences are worrisome. At a round table on EU integration and Western Balkans held in New York in September 2019, Zaev argued that deals like the

¹³ J.-A. Dérens and L. Geslin, “No holds barred in revived cold war. Balkans are the new front line,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, July 2015, <https://mondediplo.com/2015/07/04balkans>

¹⁴ Florian Bieber, “For Macedonia, Is Joining NATO and the EU Worth the Trouble?” *Foreign Affairs*, 13 September 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/13/for-macedonia-is-joining-nato-and-the-eu-worth-the-trouble/>

¹⁵ Sinisa Jakov Marusic, “Macedonia Starts Procedure on Changing Country’s Name,” *Balkan Insight*, 8 October 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/10/08/macedonia-starts-procedure-for-name-change-10-08-2018/>

PA are usually signed after wars¹⁶ (indeed, after a capitulation). It may be just a collective perception, but perceptions (and frustrations) matter especially when it comes to societal security. Post-Prespa Macedonia is possible only as an authoritarian (in other words, Orwellian) state; that is, if its internal divisions do not lead, as is likely, to a final disintegration along ethnic lines. The surrender has many faces—and the most significant is not necessarily what nationalists emphasize as the most crucial one. The PA's implementation is not only in the hands of the country's governing elites (both in power and opposition), but even more in those of ethnic Albanians as well as of external actors who believe that the “success story” is too big to fail.¹⁷ Just as Milosevic was once seen as the main guarantor of the Dayton agreement that put an end to the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and as such was supported by the West, the same is now the case with Zaev. Under strong external pressure (mostly from Berlin), the opposition leader Mickovski is proving not much different from Zaev—he is just as impotent and incapable of challenging the PA through political or legal action. Any move in a new direction will elicit a reaction from ethnic Albanian leaders; they are known to be loyal to their “imagined community” as well as to Washington. And if they wish to prevent the abolition of the PA, the *Badinter* (double majority) vote in parliament is at their disposal. In other words, Macedonians are essentially hostages of the power-sharing model and external intervention from the West when it comes to their identity and constitutional sovereignty.

The Reward Has Come: What is Next?

Macedonia had to fully go through 18 cycles of NATO accession talks before it finally achieved its goal, which makes it one of the countries that waited the longest at the Alliance's door. NATO membership has always been perceived in Macedonia in a twofold way: First, as the surest possible military security guarantee for the Lilliputian state, especially vis-à-vis its neighbors (in light of the so-called Macedonian Question); Second, as glue for a society that is ethnically deeply divided. NATO, together with the EU, has been one of few matters of which both the Macedonian and Albanian communities share high approval—though probably for different reasons. This unanimity has been built around a romanticized narrative of an international organization that brings internal peace and economic progress.

¹⁶ The video of this presentation is available at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=460&v=H8mY79RMxfM

¹⁷ Biljana Vankovska, “A Diplomatic Fairytale or Geopolitics as Usual: A Critical Perspective on the Agreement between Athens and Skopje,” in Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2018* (Verlag: Baden-Baden, 2019).

However, things have dramatically changed since the time when Macedonia first applied for NATO membership. The international system has gone through a number of phases, the latest of which today may be defined as a bi-multipolar system: with the US as a constant on one end, and Russia and China as variables on the other. Furthermore, the frictions among member states are no secret, threatening the Alliance's unity and efficiency. Reflecting the global reality, one could say that the Balkan region has also become a bi-multipolar microcosm.¹⁸

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Macedonia's Military Capabilities

The Krivolak Military Training Center in Macedonia is not only one of the largest in Southeast Europe, but one that is conveniently situated for more than just training purposes. It has already hosted a number of US and other NATO soldiers, and witnessed many military training exercises with mostly US equipment and weapons. The 2019 Serbian-Russian military exercises involving S-400 systems are the other side of the coin. Such muscle-showing games are now part of the landscape. The Balkan puzzle, however, needs to be seen through a bird's eye perspective. The military agreement between Skopje and Athens, following the PA, entrusted control of the Macedonian air space to the Greek Air Force.¹⁹ This immediately boosted former Prime Minister Tsipras' standing at home, as he was now in a position to tell his fellow-countrymen that thanks to the deal, Greece—rather than Turkey—now controls this part of the region.

According to journalist Vassilis Nedos, the military dimension of the relationship between Athens and Skopje will put Greece on par with Bulgaria and Turkey in the region, to the chagrin of Ankara and Sofia, who have long-established military ties with North Macedonia.²⁰ Indeed, Turkey had been a leading military supporter of the Macedonian state since 1991, along with the US. A clear sign of Turkey's growing concern over Athens's new role in Macedonia following the PA was Defense Minis-

¹⁸ Biljana Vankovska, “Geopolitics of the Prespa Agreement: Background and After-Effects,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol.22, No.3 (2020).

¹⁹ Sarantis Michalopoulos, “Greece will police North Macedonia's airspace following historic visit,” *Euractiv*, 2 April 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/greece-will-police-north-macedonias-airspace-following-historic-visit/>

²⁰ Vassilis Nedos, “Akar visits Skopje a day after Tsipras,” *Kathimerini*, 4 April 2019, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/239209/article/ekathimerini/news/akar-visits-skopje-a-day-after-tsipras>

ter Hulusi Akar's visit to Skopje with a large delegation—just one day after Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras' visit. Hulusi Akar pledged that his country was prepared to help modernize the Balkan country's army.²¹ Such a dynamic and the rhetoric used on that occasion illustrate intra-NATO collisions and distrust. The turbulence in the eastern Mediterranean—especially the erratic and at times renegade behavior of Turkey within NATO, motivated by its own national interests and regional geopolitical ambitions—has its obvious echo in the Western Balkans.

Given its capacities, Macedonia's contribution to its NATO allies is minor. Harsh US critics note that economically and militarily insignificant countries with military budgets the size of a postage stamp, such as Macedonia, are free to become members of the club, and that NATO's open door policy has turned into charity.²² According to SIPRI, military expenditure in the Balkans for 2017 shows a clear imbalance and a regional arms race in the making; with 731 million US dollars, Serbia leads the pack, spending more alone than the other five Western Balkan countries together of 570 million dollars.²³ Macedonia spends 112 million, which is almost the amount that Montenegro (74) and Kosovo (57) spend together. Yet some cynical observers have remarked that Macedonia's military budget equals 75 minutes of annual Pentagon spending; that it is a country with a 12.6 billion dollar GDP (lower than Montana's), a population of just over 2 million, and an invisible army. According to them, NATO's 30th member will be just another hanger-on.²⁴

It is hardly possible to even imagine Macedonia attaining the NATO target to spend 2 percent of its GDP on defense any time soon. This de facto mission is impossible especially now when the country is on its knees amidst economic and political paralysis due to the COVID-19 crisis. On the eve of the 2020 early parliamentary elections, the Social Democrat-led government put forward a budget—the highest one ever—of as much as 3.1 percent for defense purposes (plus an additional 6.8 percent for the police) for 2021.²⁵ Prior to the pandemic there had been certain indications that there was an ongoing redistribution within the state budget; more funds were being allocated to military purposes at the expense of education, health, envi-

²¹ "Ministerot Hulusi Akar se sostana so pretsedatelot na Severna Makedonija Gjorge Ivanov" [Minister Hulusi Akar had a meeting with the president of North Macedonia Gjorge Ivanov], *TRT Makedonski*, 4 April 2019, <https://www.trt.net.mk/makedonski/rieghion/2019/04/04/ministierot-khulusi-akar-sie-sostana-so-prietsiedatielot-na-sievierna-makiedonija-gjorghie-ivanov-1176946>

²² Daniel DePetris, "North Macedonia and NATO," *Real Clear Defense*, 26 October 2019, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/10/26/north_macedonia_and_nato_114813.html

²³ Blerim Reka, "A new military build-up in the Balkans," *Emerging Europe*, 10 January 2019, <https://emerging-europe.com/voices/a-new-military-build-up-in-the-balkans/>

²⁴ Daniel DePetris, "North Macedonia and NATO."

²⁵ "Shekerinska: Odbranbeniot budzet za 2020 e budzet na zemja-chlenka na NATO, povekje pari za oprema, povekje pari za sekoj pripadnik na Armijata" [Shekerinska: 2020 defense budget is a budget of a NATO member-state; more money for equipment, ore money for each member of the Army], 27 November 2019, <https://vlada.mk/node/19633>

ronment protection, and other social services. It is true that the Macedonian army has been struggling with basic needs for quite some time—in part due to the low economic standing of the country it serves, but also because the police force has always been the privileged rival due to the perception of internal security threats being more imminent than external ones.

“Macedonia would hardly be more secure as a NATO member state situated on the front line of great powers’ colliding interests.”

According to the *Defence News* weekly, Macedonia is already included in the US-led European Recapitalization Incentive Program (ERIP).²⁶ However, the main way that Macedonia contributes to the Alliance is geopolitically, rather than militarily. As political analysts told the *New York Times*, the addition of Macedonia to NATO is a setback for President Putin, who sees NATO as an expansionist military force on his country’s doorstep.²⁷

In sum, other than the Krivolak base, Macedonia does not have any military capabilities to offer NATO at its disposal, as even its Army’s elite units mostly serve on international missions. The general expectation is that the country’s military security will be guaranteed by NATO—or even more precisely, by the US. For that reason, the political elite’s rhetoric has changed since joining the Alliance and has become more confident, even aggressive, in their communication with Russia.

NATO membership is not just the key, but also the only achievement of the current government, which has lost sight of the larger geopolitical picture. Macedonia would hardly be more secure as a NATO member state situated on the front line of great powers’ colliding interests. Contrary to the previous belief that NATO membership would bring better international standing, more foreign investments, and internal economic progress, the reality displays a different picture. Unlike other states where national economic interests, especially in the energy field, are uppermost, Macedonia does not know how to deal with multipolarity, and vociferously rejects any cooperation that is not blessed by Washington and Brussels.

²⁶ Aaron Mentha and Sebastian Sprenger, “European defense industry could come to regret new US weapons fund,” *Defence News*, 30 May 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2019/05/30/european-defense-industry-could-come-to-regret-new-us-weapons-fund/>

²⁷ Steven Erlanger and Rick Gladstone, “With North Macedonia’s Inclusion, NATO Gets a Boost That Sends a Message,” *New York Times*, 6 February 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/world/europe/north-macedonia-nato-russia.html>

Unfortunately, NATO membership, or even increased military security, is not the right cure for Macedonia's non-military-related illnesses. The worst fears bear on a possible division of Kosovo territory (rumors about such a scenario are circulating between some quarters in Belgrade and Pristina) and the nightmare caused by a hypothetical announcement of future unification of Kosovo and Albania.

The price paid for Euro-Atlantic integration (i.e., the identity and sovereignty-related concessions made in the deals with Bulgaria and Greece) generates a self-fulfilling prophecy; everything that has been done in order to avoid a possible disaster has only worsened the existing bad enough state of affairs. In addition to the deep ethnic divisions, there are other, even deeper, intra-Macedonian gaps now. The political process has become antagonistic, as witnessed by the paranoid, Cold War-like rhetoric that pervades it. Whoever is critical of the government and its deals, especially the PA, is portrayed as an anti-Western and a pro-Russian enemy of the state.

Concluding Remarks

NATO membership has come at a far too high price. First, a small and poor country had to strengthen its military sector while the socioeconomic aspects of security were pushed aside. In reality, Macedonia had been acting as a NATO member state far prior to its official admission, often offering far more than member states. Second, and more importantly, Macedonia had to exchange its name and identity for the sake of membership to a military alliance. Collateral damages of the so-called Prespa process have been numerous, starting with serious breaches of international law and human rights, up to an excruciatingly deep polarization of the population. And to make the irony even greater, membership has come amidst the biggest health and social crisis the country has ever faced with COVID-19.

One of the myths about NATO is that it helps resolve internal conflicts and tensions in divided societies. However, this is a blatant fake proposition, as Catalonia and Northern Ireland, to mention just a few examples, show that NATO's *raison d'être* has nothing to do with the internal affairs of its member states.