

## Institute for Regional and International Studies

### **Shall We Invite Macedonia Into NATO?** *Approaches to the Future Strategic Balance of the Balkans*

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On the eve of Bucharest NATO Summit (April 2008) the Macedonian government is facing double pressure and blockade upon its ambition to receive an invitation for membership in the Alliance. On the one hand, the authorities of Greece threaten the tiny Balkan republic to impose a veto on its invitation to NATO, based on the conflict between Athens and Skopje about the constitutional name of the Republic of Macedonia. Greece, which holds within its territory more than half of the geographical region of Macedonia, feels threatened by the ambition of Skopje to appropriate the concept of “Macedonia” and “Macedonian” as its identity tag. Having been one of the most disputed pieces of land on the Balkans, the geographical region of Macedonia has been split into three parts after the Balkan wars of 1912-1913 among Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria. The Versailles Treaties of 1919 reaffirmed the dividing lines. The present day Republic of Macedonia is the former Serb – Yugoslav part of the region, which was awarded with a national identity and separate republican status after WW II.

Having emerged as a nation from the bitter Balkan disputes of the 20th century, Yugoslav Macedonians embarked on the traditional methodological platform of reaffirming a Balkan national identity – a combination of historical fantasies and “undisputable” linguistic proofs of a glorious national past, challenged by greedy Balkan neighbours. The activist appropriation of Balkan history in favour of Macedonian national glory enrages Greek authorities and public opinion since the very declaration of the Republic of Macedonia’s independence in 1991. Skopje historians and pundits seriously claim property upon Aristotle, Alexander the Great (student of the great philosopher), as well as upon the heritage of the northern Greek province of Macedonia, historically inhabited by a large number of Slavs, most of whom were largely considered Bulgarians until the 1930s. Macedonian national identity was also heavily supported with pieces of Byzantine and Bulgarian medieval history, to guarantee an “uninterrupted succession” of Macedonian identity from Alexander the Great until present. An eccentric method of countering “great Macedonian fantasies” was employed by Greek diplomacy after 1991 – a blockade on the constitutional name of the tiny republic for international use. Athens insisted – and succeeded in promoting the strange acronym of FYROM – the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Without endorsing Macedonian historical fantasies, we have to admit that such an official name of a sovereign country is humiliating and inadequate.

The Republic of Macedonia badly needs membership into NATO and fast track promotion to EU membership. The country faces deepening economic crisis with more than 40 per cent unemployment and a fragile ethnic balance between Slav Macedonians and the large community of Albanians (about 600 000 out of the 2 million overall population). Albanian armed rebellion of 2001 has caused interference and assistance on behalf of the EU, which has promoted the Ohrid agreement between Slav Macedonians and Albanians, presuming a complicated political system of “consociational (consensual) democracy”. The independence of Kosovo and the dynamics of Albanian national question on the Balkans provoke anxiety

among Slav Macedonians about further potential escalation of Albanian irredentist agenda towards Macedonia, and general instability of the economic, institutional and public environment. That is the context of NATO membership importance for stabilizing the small republic as a legitimate part of the democratic community of nations.

The US envoy Matthew Nimitz is trying hard for months now to broker a deal between Athens and Skopje in order to avoid blockade on Macedonia's invitation to NATO in Bucharest. Athens had to endorse a list of potential names for its small northern neighbour, in order to reduce the threat of further claims on behalf of Skopje to the legacy, the population and the territories of northern Greece – that is the Greek province of Macedonia. “Upper Republic of Macedonia”, “Democratic Republic of Macedonia” are examples from the list. Macedonian PM Nikola Gruevski has pragmatically embarked on the opportunity to end up “the name issue” with a reasonable compromise, involving support from Macedonian public opinion. Several major polls have demonstrated the basic agreement among the majority population to endorse an additional adjective “democratic” in front of the constitutional name of the country in favor of its international promotion and stability. Yet powerful forces from the back stage have intervened and have organized radical opposition to an agreement on the name issue.

Throughout its almost 17 years of independence, the Republic of Macedonia has been governed predominantly by the economic and political infrastructure of the post-Yugoslav, former communist elite. Close relationships with Serbia, and full compliance with the political agenda of the “Big Brother” in Belgrade is the backbone definition of present day Macedonian elites, emerging from half a century Yugoslav communist rule. The influence of Belgrade upon Skopje covers the economy, the secret services (inherited from communist past), the media outlets, dependent upon major economic interests. Serbia dislikes the perspective of seeing its small neighbour to the south joining NATO for a number of reasons. Most of those reasons apply also to the interest of the key Serbian ally on the Balkans – Greece. Both Athens and Belgrade have formed the major axis of geopolitical influence on the Balkans throughout the 20th century. With the common border between them, established as a result of the Balkan wars and the WW I, Serbia and Greece have marginalized the regional influence both of post-Ottoman Turkey and Bulgaria – the country, defeated in all wars in the region.

The emergence of an independent Republic of Macedonia as an effect of Yugoslav disintegration has endangered the territorial integrity of this “*alliance cordiale*” between Athens and Belgrade. Keeping obedient post-Yugoslav elites in control of Skopje has become the *condicio sine qua non* for the existence of this Serb – Greek strategic axis. The activation of Albanian Macedonian claims, the growing dependence of Macedonia upon US and EU security sponsorship and the strategic marginalization of Serbia under the rule of Milosevic (possibly – also under the rule of Kostunica, we do not know that yet...), the independence of Kosovo – are all factors of decreasing strategic importance of Greek – Serb strategic alliance in favour of an alternative Balkan axis “East – West”, affirming the growing influence of Turkey and the Albanian communities and the Western Alliance in the strategic balance of the region. With its geographical position, Macedonia plays a key role in reproducing both regional axes of strategic influence – “North – South” and “East – West”.

Greek business took the initiative of becoming the major strategic investor in Macedonian privatization, therefore establishing a contradictory status of Greece in the small republic. For Skopje Greece is the major rival against Macedonian identity and the major factor of

influence upon Macedonian economy. Partnership with Serb dominated local post-Yugoslav elites has made Greek economic penetration easy and efficient. When Milosevic faced the NATO attack against Serbia in 1999, Belgrade transferred large portions of its control over the local security infrastructure to its Greek partners. An additional factor of Serb – Greek success to control Skopje is the strong allegiance of Macedonian post-Yugoslav elites to Serbia – viewed as a sponsor and a guarantee for their version of Yugoslav Macedonian identity – an identity, which keeps them in power.

Jeopardizing the NATO invitation for Macedonia is a key target of this triple alliance among the political factors of Greece, Serbia and the post-Yugoslav – post-communist Macedonian elites. After PM Gruevski received the moderate and conditional – yet essential support from Macedonian public opinion, the anti-NATO forces moved into action under the banner of radical Macedonian nationalism, “outraged” by the Greek pressure on the name issue. It is useless to say that Greek pressure is also well orchestrated in order to bring a potential compromise to the brink of failure. Without an agreement with Athens on the name of the republic, Skopje will not receive the NATO invitation in April.

It seems like that the drama of Macedonian integration to the Western Alliance is a small regional issue, which has no reference to major European or international decision making. Yet it has its importance in the context of the international community efforts to bring the Balkans into the European mainstream. The angry opposition of Serbia against the independence of Kosovo has brought Russia much deeper into the Balkan equation of security and strategic balance. While Europe aims at uniting the Western Balkans under a possibly fast track of EU integration, Russia’s strategic interest is to restore division lines in the region in order to benefit from its restored economic and political influence. Both Serbia and Greece are sympathizing to those ambitions of Moscow, because they serve the agenda of reducing the influence of rising Albanian nationalism and limiting US and EU control over the region.

The fate of tiny Republic of Macedonia plays a significant role in this dynamic strategic equation. If Macedonia is stabilized and integrated into the European mainstream and in NATO, the Belgrade – Athens axis of penetrating Russian power will be more vulnerable at the expense of Western sponsored “East – West” axis of strategic influence. If Macedonia is kept outside the doors of Europe and NATO, its fate will most likely end up in bitter splits and conflicts between Slav Macedonian community in defensive, and the rising irredentist Albanian Macedonian factor. Splitting the tiny republic would ease up the marginalization and satellitization of the Slav Macedonian part back to its former masters in Belgrade – in cooperation with Athens and Moscow.

The EU needs to support integration of the Republic of Macedonia into Europe and the NATO as an essential part of its efforts to modernize and integrate the Western Balkans into its mainstream. Macedonia is a young nation with a positive record of multicultural living, which is capable to contribute to the overall success of European strategy on the Balkans.

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