

North Macedonia and its Neighbours: Challenges and Perspectives

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Abstract

In this paper, the author has analysed the perspectives of Macedonia's new foreign policy concept regarding its neighbours since the second half of 2017. Therefore, he points to Macedonia's numerous bilateral issues, primarily about its name with neighbouring Greece. The paper also includes a review of other open issues with Bulgaria and Albania, which jeopardize its path towards the EU and NATO membership.

The signing of two crucial bilateral agreements with Bulgaria (2017) and Greece (2018) has significantly changed its foreign policy position and accelerated the realization of its Euro-Atlantic perspective. Additionally, Macedonia has improved relations with Albania and Kosovo. Although the relations with Serbia have oscillated, they cannot, in general, be labelled as bad.

The author concludes that the determination of the new Macedonian political elite to resolve the accumulated bilateral issues with its neighbours is very significant in the broader regional context. It also represents a stimulus for the rest of the Western Balkans.

Complex Historical Context of Macedonia's Relations with its Neighbours

The Macedonian national question, as one of the controversial problems in Southeast Europe in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, has caused constant tensions and problems between Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece and since 1912 with Albania. (Gleni 1999: 205-209) Namely, in the Ottoman Empire, along with its apparent weakening in the late 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, several national movements in the Balkan Peninsula strengthened. (Lila 2017: 31–35) From all of them, only the Macedonian movement has failed to realize through the formation of a separate national state. (Pavlović 2001: 36–67) Serbia and Bulgaria, which were defined as separate states in that period, certainly contributed to this. However, Greece has also succeeded in gaining a particular influence in today's Macedonia through the Orthodox clergy. (Gleni 1999: 205)

Attempts to impose their paternalistic position *vis-à-vis* the local population in Macedonia generated intensified internal tendencies in Serbia and Bulgaria to integrate this area into their composition. Despite the several uprisings of the Macedonian population on the territory of the Ottoman Empire, the most significant of which was organized in Kruševo on 2 August 1903 (*Ilinden Uprising*), Ottoman structures demonstrated extreme resistance to Macedonian ethnic identity and particularity. (ibid.: 210–215) At the beginning of the 20th century, there was significant opposition to the establishment of Macedonian identity from the neighbouring states, primarily Bulgaria and Serbia. Moreover, the Bulgarian historiography was mentioning the Ilinden Uprising as a part of the struggle of the Bulgarian population in the territory of today's Macedonia, or as frequently mentioned in the "Western Bulgaria." (ibid.: 209)

The most drastic conflicts between Serbia and Bulgaria regarding the issue of Macedonia were conducted in the Second Balkan War, i.e., during the end of June and July 1913. (Zundhausen 2008: 235–237) After that, the entire territory of today's Macedonia was incorporated into the Kingdom of Serbia. However, in the historical context and primarily because of the Great War which broke out one year later (July 1914), this area

has never been integrated into its composition. Moreover, the concept of complete denial of Macedonian ethnicity continued within the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes/Yugoslavia after 1918. (Jančeva, Litovski 2017: 149–153) Not only did this lead to internal conflicts within the Macedonian population, but also to the strengthening of certain forces that conducted the Bulgarisation of the population and trying to increase the influence of the neighbouring state. The said was confirmed by the relatively easy and quick realization of Bulgarian occupation and annexation of this area after 1941. (ibid, 153–158) Furthermore, a significant part of the western parts of Macedonia dominated by the Albanians was annexed to self-proclaimed Greater Albania. (ibid.: 155)

During the second half of the Second World War, on 2 August 1944 (the religious holiday Ilinden), the Anti-fascist Sobranie for the National Liberation of Macedonia (ASNOM) was formed in the monastery of Sveti Prohor Pčinjski, re-affirming the ethnic and linguistic specificity of Macedonia as well as the status of the constituent element within the framework of the future Federal Yugoslavia. (Pravna enciklopedija 1979: 39) During 1944 and 1945, the Democratic Federal Republic of Macedonia or later the People's Republic of Macedonia was constituted. (ibid.: 39)

However, during this period emerged significant antagonisms with the Yugoslav neighbours about the identity issues of the Macedonians. Namely, since the constitution of ASNOM, Greece has denied Macedonia's right to use the term of the Macedonia geographic region and attempts to link the history of Slovenian Macedonians with the legacy of ancient/Hellenic Macedonia. (Gavranov, Stojković 1972: 215–216) Also, neighbouring Bulgaria denied the existence of Macedonian ethnicity and the Macedonian language, considering that it was *de facto* Bulgarian ethnicity, as well as one Bulgarian dialect.

Until the Second World War, Serbian civil circles were not inclined to recognize Macedonian ethnicity, using the term "Old/South Serbia" for this part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. (Jančeva, Litovski 2017: 151) However, due to the anti-fascist struggle and the victory of the anti-fascist forces in Serbia, which have advocated the federal organization of Yugoslavia and the equality of its peoples, the official Serbian communist party and republican structures accepted this principle. It also implied the recognition of the Macedonians as a nation,

as well as the Macedonian language. However, some Serbian nationalist dissident circles and part of the general public had reservations. Especially after the declaration of the autocephaly of the Archbishopric of Ohrid or the Macedonian Orthodox Church on 19 July 1967, which was part of the Serbian Orthodox Church. (Đorđević, 2005) Since then, this issue between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church has not only been broadly transposed to the relations of both Serbs and Macedonians, but also to the relations between Serbia and Macedonia. (ibid.)

Macedonian Independence since 1991 and newly expressed Problems with Neighbours

On the eve of the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Macedonia embarked on the realization of its independence in extremely challenging conditions. Despite particular initiatives coming from this southernmost Yugoslav republic to preserve and transform the federal state through the asymmetrical federation, it, however, declared its independence in a referendum on 8 September 1991. (Katz 2014: 191–210) Thus, Macedonia was again in a tough hard position, given the numerous oppositions from its neighbours, but without the former Yugoslav “protective umbrella”. (Jančeva, Litovski 2017: 166–167)

Bulgaria was the first country to recognize Macedonia's independence (15 January 1992); however, the recognition of Macedonian ethnicity and language did not follow. (MFA) Thus, it significantly reflected the relations between the two countries and different interpretations of specific periods of their history, which, when it comes to neighbouring Macedonia, Bulgaria considered for its own. The tensions mentioned above were frequent, but Bulgaria has managed to strengthen its influence during this and previous decade by granting scholarships to Macedonian students, but also citizenship to its citizens. (B92 2006) Nevertheless, in general, the Bulgarian-Macedonian bilateral relations were rather bad, which threatened that Bulgaria would exercise the right to block Macedonia's accession to NATO and the European Union.

Greece *de facto* did not recognize Macedonia following the Interim Accord until 13 September 1995. (Interim Accord

1995) However, these relations were at the level of the liaison offices, and since 2004 they were conducted through consular offices in Bitola and Thessaloniki. (ibid.: Article 1) On the other hand, Greece has consistently disputed the right to use the term Macedonia, but also the use of specific national and state symbols. Namely, the “Vergina Sun” displayed on the first flag of independent Macedonia had to be replaced in 1995 with a redesigned flag. (Kornfein 2013: 83) Also, under the United Nations system, the name “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” was used for this country. (ibid.: 80) Greece has been persisting with this for more than two and a half decades, conditioning with this issue Macedonia’s accession to the European Union (since the end of 2005), and later to NATO (since 2008). Despite significant US influence on the NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008, Greece did not allow Macedonia to join this alliance under its constitutional name.

In this respect, Macedonia has filed a lawsuit in the International Court of Justice concerning the alleged violations of the Interim Accord. (MFAa) At the end of 2011, this court ruled that Greece had violated the Interim Accord. (ibid.) The official Athena, therefore, has been highly successful in utilizing the potentials for conditioning Macedonia on the path towards full membership in NATO and the EU. Macedonia was thus left on the verge of Euro-Atlantic processes, but also led to the strengthening of conservative and nationalistic political options and forces. Also, Greece and its church did not recognize the Macedonian Orthodox Church, and it should be noted that after the Second World War, a significant part of Slovenian Macedonians was forced to leave today’s Aegean Macedonia. (Gavranov, Stojković 1972: 215)

Macedonia and Albania established diplomatic relations in April 1992, and these were mostly related to the status of the Albanians settled in the western parts of Macedonia. (MFAb) Namely, even during the first decade of Macedonian independence, ideas to federalize the state through the creation of two monoethnic entities (Albanian and Macedonian) emerged. Hence, in 1992, the self-proclaimed Republic of Ilirida was declared, and significant conflicts between the Albanian rebels and Macedonian authorities lasted throughout 2001. (Vukotić 2014) This conflict ended with the Ohrid Agreement (13 August 2001), which was later fully implemented after the change of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia.

(Andonovski 2018: 23—49) It ensured the participation of Albanian representatives at all levels of the government in Macedonia. However, neighbouring Albania was more concerned with the question of “consistent implementation of the Ohrid Agreement” in the context of Macedonia’s NATO membership. (Blic 2015) Bearing in mind that Albanian political parties play a significant role in the political life of Macedonia, they have succeeded in actual influencing the constitution of power, i.e., the election of dominant Macedonian political options and the formation of the government.

Macedonia recognized Kosovo in the second half of 2008 and succeeded in developing significant forms of bilateral cooperation, mainly economic. In this way, the relations between Macedonian authorities and the Albanian community have been further improved.

Serbia or the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia acknowledged Macedonia under its constitutional name as late as 1996, and the period of economic sanctions against the FRY (1992—1995) negatively affected the dynamics of mutual economic relations. (Đukanović 2016: 190) Apart from the non-recognition of the Macedonian Orthodox Church from the Serbian Orthodox Church, there were no major open issues in the relations between the two countries. Moreover, the first formal demarcation on the territory of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia occurred between the FR Yugoslavia and Macedonia in 2001. (Ugovor 2001) However, relations were provisionally exacerbated by Macedonia’s recognition of Kosovo’s independence in October 2008. It should additionally be noted that long-standing Macedonian Prime Minister and leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Nikola Gruevski (2006—2016), has long maintained the most prominent political relations with the official Belgrade.

Deceleration of Macedonia’s Accession to the EU and NATO after 2005

The persistent insistence of the European Union to overcome bilateral problems in the Western Balkans before it enters the finalization of the accession process has not yielded any meaningful results. This situation blocked Macedonia regarding its relations with the EU. Although Macedonia gained

candidate status for the EU membership in November 2005, due to neighbouring Greece and its blockade, it did not start the accession negotiations. (Đukanović 2016: 70) A similar situation was with NATO accession. At the Bucharest Summit in 2008, Greece insisted on the change of Macedonian constitutional name, and with this slowed down the process. (ibid.: 94–95) That is why, in this period, Macedonia has gone into a certain self-isolation, lack of understanding of its own foreign and international position and has slipped to authoritarian tendencies and the growth of nationalism. The said situation has also been reflected upon by many international officials. Moreover, Macedonia has long been in the shadow of some other regional issues (such as the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina or the resolution of Kosovo's status). (Torov 2010) It also caused Macedonia to step down from the position of "leader" in the entire Western Balkans region in the accession to the European Union and NATO and remain almost on the very margin of these processes.

Due to its stubborn political views and at the same time, avoiding any relevant public debate, the government embodied in VMRO-DPMNE has been trying to block any possible agreement with Greece over the name of the country. The said virtually completely stalled the EU and NATO integration process, but also led to the more visible attachment to some other actors, such as Russia and Turkey. (Nezavisne novine 2017) Moreover, it seemed that Macedonia would only "slip up" deeper in its hard positions towards some neighbours, above all Greece and Bulgaria, which are both the EU and NATO members. All this was followed by the internal re-traditioning of the Macedonian society, the increasing influence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, and the strengthening of ethnonationalism. Apart from the above-mentioned, the linking of certain continuities of the contemporary Macedonian state and ethnicity with the ancient antique heritage was also historically very questionable. (Stanković 2012)

Formation of the new Government of Macedonia 2017

The threatened Macedonia to become a self-isolated state and captured into a multitude of open questions with its neighbours. The intense dialogue between the authorities and the opposition concerning the internal political crisis, which

lasted between 2015 and 2016, resulted in an agreement to hold parliamentary elections in late 2016. (DW 2016) However, these elections also manifested a traditional split between the two dominant options – VMRO-DPMNE and the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM), i.e., their electoral lists and coalitions. VMRO-DPMNE gained a minor advantage with 38.14% of the votes (51 mandates), while the opposition SDSM won near 37% (49 mandates). (N1 2016) The dominant Albanian political parties – the Democratic Union for Integration, the Besa Movement, the Alliance for Albanians, and the Democratic Party of Albanians, together, won 18 mandates.

After the Albanian political parties decided to enter the coalition with the oppositional SDSM, it was clear that the country would plunge into a political crisis. Namely, it lasted 171 days. Significant obstacles to the formation of government were also caused by President Gjorgje Ivanov, who gave his party colleague Grueski a mandate for the composition of the government even though he did not secure a parliamentary majority. (Politika 2018) When Zoran Zaev, leader of the oppositional SDSM, secured the parliamentary majority in the Sobranie on 27 April 2017, there was a particularly brutal physical attack on him and his party counterparts. (Novi Magazin 2017) Nevertheless, the crisis reached an epilogue when Brian Hoyt Yee, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary for Europe and Eurasia, visited Skopje on 1 May 2017, after which the entire crisis was channelled through the parliamentary procedure. (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2017) Consequently, on 31 May 2017, five months after the parliamentary elections, a new Macedonian government was elected, headed by Zoran Zaev. In his numerous speeches, as well as in his presentation, Prime Minister Zaev emphasized the need to improve Macedonia's relations with its neighbours. (Blic, 2017)

The basic principles of the new foreign policy of Macedonia after 2017: highlighted Euro-Atlantic integrations and good neighbourly relations in the Balkans

It is imperative to note the essential characteristics of the new foreign policy of Macedonia after 2017. In the first place, it focused on the prompt resolution of numerous problems with neighbours accumulated over the past years, and above all, those most difficult with Greece and Bulgaria. However, this

was a very demanding goal, which proved to be realistic in the first year and half of the new government led by Zoran Zaev. The willingness to get immersed in solving these problems is a fundamental difference to the earlier right-wing governments led by Nikola Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE. Although he occasionally sent signals, both to the EU and the USA, that he would solve these problems, former Prime Minister Gruevski did not do so primarily because of the resistance of the right-wing part of the Macedonian public.

Macedonia has shown its commitment to good neighbourly relations by taking part in numerous regional initiatives and forums in South East Europe and the Western Balkans. The secretariats of several regional initiatives are located in Skopje (Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative — MAARI, South East Europe Health Network — SEE HN, Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe — NALAS, etc. (Lopandić, Kronja 2011: 305–320)

The second complementary goal was related to the previous full implementation of the first one, which is the acceleration of Euro-Atlantic integration. In that sense, the country's entry into NATO has been unblocked, and soon it is also expected to get a date for the start of negotiations on EU membership¹. Showing the example of good practice in resolving relations with neighbours has contributed to the alleviation of tensions in the Western Balkans and throughout the Balkan Peninsula. By addressing the name dispute, the new Macedonian authorities have shown how important is good political will and determination of political actors to solve a highly complex and decades-old issue, without adverse effect on the vital interests of the Macedonian people and the citizens of Macedonia.

The complete complementarity of both goals and their implementation has contributed to Macedonia's recognition as a constructive actor in the very turbulent Western Balkans and the equally unstable modern Europe. The significance of nearly three decades of Macedonia's long strategic partnership with the United States should not be underestimated, which contributed primarily to the country's emergence from a specific international (self) isolation, and then a successful

1 The full membership of the Republic of Northern Macedonia to NATO is expected at the end of 2019 or early 2020 and the date for the start of negotiations on EU membership in September or October of the current year.

re-affirmation after 2017. (Đukanović 2016: 122)

a) *Further improvement of Macedonia's relations with Albania*

At the beginning of January 2017, in Tirana, leaders of Albanian political parties from Macedonia defined a unique platform under the auspice of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama. (RTS 2017) It preceded the total turnaround of these parties from VMRO-DPMNE to SDSM regarding the forming of a new government. In addition to emphasizing the necessity for the full implementation of the Ohrid Agreement, on which Tirana insisted earlier, the document stressed the necessity of "ethnic equality of the Albanian population" in Macedonia. (ibid.) At the same time, the initiative for the Albanian language to become the second official language in Macedonia was also promoted. Thus, a special law was adopted at the beginning of 2018 in the Sobranie. (Balkan Insight 2018) This paper focused on a necessary discussion about the existing symbols of Macedonia, its steady economic development, as well as the cultural rights of the Albanians. (RTS 2017) Particularly emphasized was the need to resolve the name dispute with Greece, and, in that connection, the inclusion of the Albanians and their political leaders. (ibid.) Also, the document insisted on establishing closer cooperation with Albania and Kosovo and accelerating the integration of this country into the EU and NATO. (ibid.)

After the disclosure of this document, it was clear that a new coalition would be formed in Macedonia, which the ruling VMRO-DPMNE was opposing for more than a decade. Also, the re-affirmation of specific issues concerning the rights of the Albanians has only homogenized nationalistic circles in the ethnic Macedonian corps and provoked a multitude of controversial appearances by then-state officials, as well as numerous tensions.

After the government of Prime Minister Zaev achieved some progress in relations with Bulgaria (2017) and then with Greece (2018), and as the process of amending the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia started in line with the agreement reached with Greece, the Albanian political parties have requested that the Ohrid Peace Accord be further emphasized in the Preamble of the Constitution, (Vlada na Makedonija 2018: amandman XXXIV) although it has been fully incorporated in this constitutional act in the earlier 2001 constitutional

changes. (Andonovski 2018: 23—49) During the discussion on the changes to the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, one of the delegates of the Alliance for Albanians proposed an amendment in which, next to Greece, Bulgaria, Albania, and Serbia, Kosovo would be listed as a neighbouring country of Macedonia. (RTK2 2018) In addition to Macedonia's formal recognition of Kosovo in 2008, this would further confirm the tendencies in relations with Pristina, which were significantly useful, especially in the economy. (Marlov, Ivanova 2013: 259—264) The new Macedonian Government has intensely supported the process of full normalization of relations between the authorities in Belgrade and Pristina, and it is frequently noted that without resolving this problem, it will not be easy to provide full regional stability. (Večernje novosti 2017)

In the following period, Albania will undoubtedly provide added support to Macedonia to join NATO after the implementation of the Prespa Agreement, which can be expected in 2020. However, initiating new issues such as the Macedonian symbols and the like, on the other hand, would not contribute to good relations between the Albanians and Macedonians in this country nor its relations with Albania. However, adoption of the law on the official use of the Albanian language at the state level of Macedonia at the beginning of 2018 confirmed the determination of the ruling SDSM and Prime Minister Zaev to improve relations with the Albanian population in the country.

b) *First Significant Progress in Relations with Neighbouring countries — The Treaty between Macedonia and Bulgaria (1 August 2017)*

The first noteworthy progress in relations with its neighbours, Macedonia achieved on 1 August 2017, with the signing of the Treaty on friendship, neighbourliness, and cooperation with Bulgaria. (Vlada na Makedonija, 2017) It was significant because of constant identity disputes with Bulgaria and the latent threats that it would use it as a blackmailing potential regarding Macedonia's entry into the EU and NATO. This Treaty indeed represented an increasingly significant improvement in relations between the two countries.

This Treaty remarkably relieved the relations in the southeast of Europe and pointed to the necessity of addressing problems that carry an overly complex historical heritage. (ibid.: preamble) Interestingly, this document did not mention the Bulgarian

and Macedonian language directly, but official languages in Bulgaria and Macedonia following their constitutional acts. (ibid.: člen 14) In the context of creating a secure environment in South East Europe, both states agreed to strengthen bilateral cooperation, and Bulgaria would provide support when it comes to Macedonia's entry into NATO and the European Union. (ibid.: člen 2 i 3) Also, the two states agreed to closely cooperate when it comes to the work of international organizations and forums. (ibid., člen 3) Moreover, substantial attention in the Treaty was also dedicated to the strengthening of cooperation from local to central levels of government, as well as enhancing the cooperation in the field of tourism and infrastructure. (ibid.: člen 4 i 6) There was also the initiation of further cooperation through new bilateral agreements in the areas of "culture, education, health, social protection, and sport". (ibid.: člen 8)

A special Joint Interdisciplinary Committee of Experts on Historical and Educational Issues has been set up to overcome numerous conflicting interpretations of specific periods of Macedonian and Bulgarian history. (ibid.: člen 8) Its goal was to analyse individual historical personalities and events and prevent opposite interpretations. At the same time, with this Treaty, Macedonia committed itself not to encourage in any way the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria to separatism. (ibid.: člen 11,5) This issue primarily referred to Pirin Macedonia, which was extremely important for Bulgaria, and a similar solution appeared later in agreement with Greece about Aegean Macedonia.

During 2017 and 2018, there has been considerable progress in Macedonia's relations with Bulgaria, but the occasional misunderstandings regarding the Macedonian language reappeared in the public discourse of the authorities in Sofia. It seems that this issue, as well as the question of the interpretation of the history of the 20th century, will remain something that will be debated in the long run. (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2018) One cannot easily overlook these disagreements about history merely by the joint celebrations of Ilinden. Also, the Macedonian Orthodox Church is increasingly turning to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which does not want to confront the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church regarding this issue. (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2017b)

c) *The most significant breakthrough in Macedonia's relations with its neighbours: The Prespa Agreement with Greece (17*

June 2018)

In the broader historical sense, Macedonia was the most burdened with the dispute over its name with neighbouring Greece. Moreover, despite the numerous efforts to find a compromise after 1991 and thanks to Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary-General Matthew Nimetz, that did not happen. On the contrary, the parties have been very often far from the solution. Proportionally to that, there was a rise in the number of proposals for changing the name of Macedonia. During the year 1995, a provisional agreement was reached, which lasted for 24 years. (Interim Accord 1995) It stipulated that the Republic of Macedonia would be presented as “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” in the United Nations. (ibid.) This issue heavily burdened Macedonia’s foreign policy position and *de facto* slowed down its path to the EU and NATO membership, although it was the first of the Western Balkan states which embarked on this path in the middle of the 1990s. Macedonia was granted candidate status for membership in the European Union in November 2005 but has not opened the negotiation process since then. An analogous situation is with NATO because Greece did not allow Macedonia to be approved the membership invitation in 2008.

Former governments dominated by VMRO-DPMNE did not want to accept any change of the name, although the problem was only the “external” use of the state’s name, not the change of the constitution and the name for the internal use. With the arrival of the new SDSM-led government, dialogue with the official Athens intensified, which was followed by a specially strengthened role and engagement of the United States. The USA has encouraged both parties to finalise the dialogue, as well as to find the solution as soon as possible. Although there were presented various proposals to be added in front of the name Macedonia such as New/Upper/Vardar/Ilinden, the compromise which was achieved envisaged the name “Republic of North Macedonia”. (Danas 2018)

The agreement was signed on 17 June 2018 in Prespa, near the Macedonian-Greek border, by the premiers of the two countries and in the presence of many officials. It was based on earlier arrangements, intensification of bilateral cooperation, and the establishment of a strategic partnership between Greece and Macedonia. (Prespa Agreement 2018) The key foundations

of the Macedonian national identity were preserved, such as the language for which it was specified that it belonged to the South Slavic group of languages. (ibid.: Article 1, 3b; Article 7,4) The determinant Macedonian and Macedonian citizenship were also preserved. (ibid.: Article 1, 3b) The first part of this agreement focused precisely on these identity issues, but it also referred to the principles of international law, membership in the United Nations, and good neighbourly relations. (ibid.: Part One) It has also been indicated the following: both sides would respect the state borders; both sides were against irredentism and secessionism; that they would not mingle in each other's internal affairs; that they were against the use of the heritage of ancient Greek culture from the Macedonian side. (ibid.: Article 4—8) In this regard, a special Commission would be formed, composed of experts in the field of history and education, to address the problems related to conflicting interpretations of history. (ibid.: Article 8, 5)

The second part of the agreement determined a whole spectrum of areas in which the strategic partnership of the two countries would be established. (ibid.: Part Two) Particularly significant was the rise of diplomatic relations between Greece and Macedonia at the level of ambassadors, which was a substitute for the existing liaison offices. (ibid.: Article 10) The agreement has also envisaged the strategic cooperation in international organizations and forums and political cooperation with the formation of a special high-level council to oversee and foster the partnership. (ibid.: Article 11) Boosting economic cooperation as well as "cooperation in the fields of education, science, culture, research, technology, health and sport" were highlighted as priorities of the future strategic partnership between Macedonia and Greece. (ibid.: Article 15) Also, there was the strengthening of interstate defence cooperation as well as cooperation in the field of civil protection. (ibid.: Article 16) Taking everything into account, it was an extensive list of areas for the strategic cooperation and the commitment of Skopje and Athens to enhance previously weak bilateral relations through such intense cooperation.

Based on this agreement, the Government of Macedonia organized a referendum on 30 September 2018, which was not legally binding, but it indeed revealed remarkably interesting mood indicators of the citizens. The majority voted to accept the Treaty (about 95%), but more than half of the total voters

did not attend the referendum (about 37%). (Dnevnik 2018) This, somehow, decreased the initial optimism regarding the implementation of the Prespa Agreement. However, it was quickly recovered. On 19 October, the Macedonian Government succeeded in gaining the consent of two-thirds of the deputy in the Sobranie and commencing the process of constitutional reforms under the Prespa Agreement. 80 of the 120 deputies voted in the state parliament to initiate the change of the Constitution of Macedonia. At the beginning of November, amendments were introduced to the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, which were aligned with the Prespa Agreement. Namely, the word “North” was added in front of the word Macedonia in the Constitution’s text while the second amendment highlighted the preamble reference to the inheritance of ASNOM, where the Ohrid Peace Agreement was also mentioned. (Vlada na Makedonija 2018)

The third amendment regulated the role of Macedonia towards its nationals residing abroad, but with the indication that it would not interfere with the internal affairs of other states regarding this issue. (ibid.: amandman XXXVI) Moreover, Macedonia was obliged to protect the historical and cultural heritage of the Macedonian people. (ibid.: amandman XXXVI)

It should also be noted the significant escalation of Greek nationalism, which manifested itself through mass protests and opposition to the agreement between Macedonia and Greece. (Garda 2018) Even so, there was still much pressure regarding the implementation of the Prespa Agreement, primarily from the EU and the United States. On 25 January 2019, the Greek Parliament adopted the Prespa Agreement, followed by changes in the Constitution and full implementation of the Prespa Agreement in Macedonia. There was a narrow majority in the Greek Parliament with only 153 votes in favour and 146 against. (Blic, 2019)

On the other hand, we need to assess the real capacities and the extent of the announced strategic partnership between Greece and Macedonia. There is a possibility that this partnership might be more symbolic to relax the public of both countries to accept compromises. However, Macedonia received an invitation to join NATO on 12 July 2018, and there is a prospect of opening negotiations with the European Union in the coming year. (Invitation 2018) Thus, this country will escape its earlier

(self) isolation and the ultimate peripheral role in the Western Balkan region.

d) *Relations between Macedonia and Serbia during 2017 and 2018: good and bad oscillations*

Relations between Macedonia and Serbia since 2012, i.e., the arrival of the Serbian Progressive Party to power in Belgrade, have been good. Moreover, it seemed that Serbia's relations with this country were the most productive. (Simić, Đukanović, Živojinović 2013: 104—118) The said was confirmed by the visit of Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić to Macedonia in 2012 when he and Macedonian President Gjorgje Ivanov agreed to support the resolution of the inter-church dispute. (ibid.: 114) However, it was evident that the authorities in Belgrade still preferred VMRO-DPMNE and the misunderstandings with the new SDSM were deepened by the presence of one of the members of the Serbian intelligence service during the violent events in the Sобрание on 27 April 2017. (B92 2017)

Two and a half months after the inauguration of the new Government of Macedonia, in the second half of August 2017, a rather unusual situation happened when the entire Embassy of the Republic of Serbia had been withdrawn from Skopje due to not entirely clear circumstances. (Glas Amerike 2017) Despite the many media speculations, the real reason for this unusual act in the diplomatic practice remained unknown.

However, after a telephone conversation between President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and Prime Minister of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, on 23 August 2017, five points on inter-state relations were published in the official announcement. (RTS 2017a) They emphasized the necessity of mutual dialogue, which, despite specific differences, should contribute to the friendly relations of nations and states. (ibid.) In this joint statement, the intensification of economic and trade exchanges was also underlined, as well as the need to deepen regional cooperation and securing stability. (ibid.) Both sides have undertaken to further protect diplomatic and consular missions in their territory. (ibid.)

Another minor problem appeared in 2018 regarding the import of flour from Serbia to Macedonia, due to excise stamps on larger packaging, but it was temporarily solved. (N1 2018) In addition to this, on 21 November 2017, there was another

meeting of Vučić and Zaev in Belgrade, where good bilateral relations were confirmed. (RTS 2017b) On 2 September 2018, at their reunion at the Tabanovce/Preševo border crossing, there was an additional dissolution of relations. (Telegraf 2018) Both countries were ready to continue cooperating intensively in the field of European integration, and it was of immense importance that the Serbian president unambiguously supported the full implementation of the agreement between Greece and Macedonia. (ibid.)

However, there was still an open question of the relations between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church, which would continue to remain predominantly in the sphere of relations between the two states due to the unwillingness of the SPC to achieve a compromise. (Helsinkiški bilten 2018) At the same time, at the beginning of the last decade, the Serbian Orthodox Church removed the memorial plaque of ASNOM in Prohor Pčinjski monastery in the south of Serbia. (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2017) Since 2003, Macedonian officials have not come to honour Ilinden, i.e., the day of ASNOM establishment. (ibid.) Another issue that can initiate further disagreement between Serbia and Macedonia is related to Macedonia's entry into NATO, which is not entirely complementary to the foreign policy agenda of Serbia.

Conclusion

The new Macedonian government, constituted in 2017, succeeded in overcoming the numerous key bilateral issues with its neighbours just one year after its formation. Moreover, significant efforts have been made primarily for the consolidation of intra-ethnic circumstances between the Macedonians and Albanians, which was also transposed on Macedonia's relations with neighbouring Albania. These relations are now promoted further, and there is no potential for blocking Macedonia's entry into NATO, which has been debated in the official Tirana in previous years. A comparable situation is with Kosovo, with which the previous government had also well-regulated bilateral relations.

Of course, the most significant breakthrough of the new Macedonian Government has been achieved in its relation to Greece, where it has demonstrated a significant degree

of compromise even in terms of empathetic identity determinants, to which the name of the country for internal and external use belongs. Also, resetting the relations between Macedonia and Greece after a twenty-seven years-long dispute will undoubtedly contribute to the accelerated dynamics of the Euro-Atlantic integration of this country. It is confirmed by the strategic partnership between the two countries envisaged by the Prespa Agreement in several areas. This case has proven useful for overcoming some other similar issues in the Western Balkans region, especially when it comes to relations between Serbia and Kosovo. (Blic 2018) Furthermore, the determination and courage of the Macedonian political leadership to face the unpopularity of solving the significant problem of the name of the state, and to compromise it with neighbouring Greece should also be emphasized.

Credible public opinion polls showed primarily that the Prespa Agreement did not receive significant support from the Macedonian citizens. (Križalovski 2018) This was proved by a non-binding referendum on the Prespa Agreement, which was held on 30 September 2018, but also numerous researches over the past years. (Klekovski, Mihailovska, Jovanov 2018: 26–42) Bearing in mind that the pre-referendum campaign in Macedonia lasted only three and a half months, one should not be surprised by the inadequate response from the citizens.

Also, considering that the state's name issue represents an essential part of the foundations of the Macedonian national identity, one should not be surprised by a rather unconvincing majority that "copied" to the presidential elections in Macedonia on 5 May 2019. As a result, Stevo Pendarovski, as the candidate of the SDSM and the Albanian Democratic Union for Integration, won 51.6 percent in the second round, and the opposition candidate from VMRO-DPMNE, Gordana Siljanovska Dakova won 44.7 percent. (New Magazine 2019) However, this confirmed that the majority of the citizens after their initial negative attitude towards the Prespa Agreement gradually changed their views by identifying the only realistic option for the country in the policy of a clear Euro-Atlantic commitment, as well as good neighbourly relations in the Balkans.

Noteworthy progress has been made in the second half of 2017 and during 2018 in the relations between Macedonia and Bulgaria. The relations with this country are particularly

sensitive, bearing in mind the historical context of relations and often the negative attitude towards Macedonian ethnic identity. However, the Agreement from August 2017 has further relaxed these relations and placed them in the context of Macedonia's faster European and Euro-Atlantic perspective. Of course, specific issues such as different interpretations of history or the Macedonian language are to remain particular lines of separation between the official Sofia and Skopje.

Macedonia's relations with Serbia were also very satisfactory in the past, even though Macedonia recognized Kosovo's independence in 2008. (Đukanović 2016: 190) However, although it is not a predominantly global issue, it is clear that the relations between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church remain the most significant problem. It mainly refers to the fact that the MPC demanded a mediating and "maternal" role from Bulgaria Orthodox Church during 2018 to gain recognition from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. (Al Jazeera Balkans 2018)

In general, as a particular country of the former Yugoslavia, which had problems with the new (Serbia) and old neighbours (Greece, Bulgaria, and Albania), Macedonia has managed to achieve a significant turnaround and progress improving these relations in a remarkably brief period since mid-2017. It also represents important encouragement regarding its accession to NATO and the EU, bearing in mind the EU Enlargement Strategy until 2025, where bilateral relations with neighbours are a priority. (European Commission 2018: 6–7) The full integration of the countries of the region into the Union, as anticipated by the strategy, will not be possible without resolving open issues with their neighbours. (ibid.: 7) The "case" of Macedonia can, therefore, represent a favourable model for the rest of the Western Balkans, given the whole multitude of unresolved bilateral problems of these countries. It should be noted that, apart from Macedonia, Serbia is also in an immensely complex situation regarding the regional context, and to a certain extent Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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