

# Helsinki *bulletin*



HELSINKI COMMITTEE  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA  
address: Kralja Milana 10,  
Belgrade, Serbia  
tel. +381-11-3032-408; fax. 2639-437;  
e-mail: office@helsinki.org.rs  
http://www.helsinki.org.rs

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## BALKAN GEOSTRATEGIC CHALLENGES: MACEDONIA A CRITICAL POINT



FONE/AP

The West's policy for the Balkans has prioritized the region's stability over open issues dating back in the 1990s. At the same time, being focused on pacification of Serbia - as the biggest and most important country in the region - it has "frozen" many a problem. Paying lip service to Serbia this policy defined it as a major factor of both stability and instability in the Balkans. Serbia is surrounded by small and unconsolidated countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia. Each of

In the center of spying affair: Opposition leader Zoran Zaev them has not consolidated its borders yet and is challenged by identity problem and internal divisions – to all of which peaceful solutions tailored to the ethnic principle considerably contributed. Besides, economies of all the three countries are in dire straits threatening with mass revolts. All this is most evident in the case of Kosovo (mass emigration, especially of the young). Bosnia experienced this last winter – although the repeat of this scenario is not out of question. But Macedonia is the softest point

in the Balkans. US' and NATO' prompt reaction, including deployment of UN troops in Macedonia, to Slobodan Milošević's attempt at Kosovo's destabilization in early 1990s testifies of this, among other things. He was warned that NATO would intervene (the so-called Christmas intervention in 1992) should he go for Kosovo – an action that would have implicated the entire South Balkans.

In 2003 the European Union /EU/ decided to open prospects for its membership to all Balkan countries fulfilling certain criteria (Copenhagen criteria). Simultaneously, first through the Partnership for Peace and then full-fledged membership NATO placed the entire region under a single security umbrella. However, the international community missed the opportunity to develop a program – similar to Marshal Plan – to assist the region's economic transition. The global economic and financial crisis affecting the entire world in 2008 hindered changes and, as it seems, blocked the region's recuperation in near future.

In early 2000 the region seemed to be heading towards the West for the first time in modern history. But the global crisis "reincarnated" Russia's presence in the Balkans. And escalation of the Ukrainian crisis further emphasized this presence as Russia definitely encroached on Europe "belly." Hence the big powers renewed their confrontation in the Balkans and undermined its prospects. The entire region welcomed the victory of the left in Greece. The "Greek scenario" could easily influence the attitude of impoverished masses throughout the region.

Macedonia is the softest point in the Balkans. All of its neighbors are after destabilizing it. The latest developments in Macedonia need to be considered in this context. Belgrade has been carefully observing the situation in Macedonia to realize its "portion" of interest in the country of fragile stability, at home and internationally.

With its poor democratic capacity, complex interethnic relations turning into incidents or conflict from time to time, and deep economic and social problems – Macedonia is a weak state. Its complexity and fragility are even more visible at international arena: it slowly but surely turns into a "steady candidate" for the membership of EU. Having obtained the candidacy status back in 2004 it has been waiting for accession negotiation for more than a decade. It has also applied for the membership of NATO – with no avail. The stumbling block in both cases is its dispute with Greece over the name; to all appearances the problem not to be solved soon.<sup>1</sup>

Macedonia is under the pressure from other neighbors too: Bulgaria, Albania and Serbia, each denying its independence and statehood under different pretext, either national, territorial or linguistic. „Careful observers know that Macedonia is a bigger powder keg than Bosnia-Herzegovina,“ says Darko Tanasković, orientologist, Serbia's ex-Ambassador to Turkey and Ambassador to UNICEF at present.<sup>2</sup>

## **ROLES OF EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCHES (RUSSIAN, SERB AND MACEDONIAN)**

Churches in Eastern Orthodox countries are influential in politics. They are often instruments by which states are achieving their political goals. The Serb Orthodox Church has been denying autochtony of the Macedonian Orthodox Church by invoking church canons. In fact, this is the way of denying Macedonian nation.

<sup>1</sup> Following on early parliamentary elections in January 2015 the newly elected Premier of Greece, Alexis Tsipras, promised his coalition partners from the extreme right-wing Independent Greeks party not to make any concession in the matter of Macedonia's name.

<sup>2</sup> Address at the launch of the book "Balkan Triangle" by Zoran Janačković; Danas, February 5, 2015.

In 2014 the Russian Orthodox Church played a major role in settling the dispute between two other two churches. Autochtony of the of the Macedonian Orthodox Church /MPC/ was proclaimed back at the time of ex-Yugoslavia, in 1967. No doubt that Serbia – in the background of SPC's formal denial of recognition – tries to ensure its „legal“ presense in its neighboring country. SPC is not registered in Macedonia but has the Ohrid Eparchy there and controversial Archbishop Jovan Vraniševski. In 2011 Vraniševski was punished with prison for fraud.

Imprisonment for Vraniševski has been a constant stumbling bloc in the way of bilateral communication: Belgrade saw the case as political rather than criminal. However, neither the media nor politicians raised the issue throughout 2014.<sup>3</sup>

To all appearances that was a tactful move to enable secret arrangements. The „second in command“ of the Russian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Ilarion, in charge of this discrete mission, paid a visit to Skopje in 2014. He met with highest governmental officials and church dignitaries – Macedonian President Đorđe Ivanov, Premier Nikola Gruevski, MPC Patriarch Stefan, and also with Archbishop Jovan Vraniševski. Vraniševski was allowed to talk to the Russian Metropolitan outside prison walls.

The Russian Metropolitan soon broke the news about his mediation in Sofia. In an interview with the VIA Agency /religious/ he said that a solution for the Macedonian Church should be based on „pan-Eastern Orthodoxy,“ adding, „We are ready to mediate the dispute.“<sup>4</sup>

3 Shortly after elected the President of Serbia Tomislav Nikolić offered Serbia's "services" in mediating the dispute. However, the Macedonian public did not welcome his offer; observers claimed it was insincere and solely motivated by a release for the SPC dignitary, Jovan Vraniševski; the Helsinki Committee 2013 Annual Report.

4 Danas, January 6-7, 2015.

What he implied by „pan-Eastern Orthodoxy“ solution was „self-government“ for MPC vis-a-vis Belgrade, the same as Eastern Orthodox churches in Ukraine, Moldova, Estonia and Lithuania have vis-a-vis the Russian Orthodox Church. Such self-government would be limited by the fact that the SPC Patriarch would have to give his assent to the election of a Macedonian patriarch.

As it turned out the whole „packet arrangement“ was agreed on during Russian Patriarch Kyril's visit to Belgrade in November 2014. That the MPC was agreeable with it became evident when it appealed to Macedonian authorities to „show mercy for the sick SPC Archbishop of Ohrid in Macedonia, Jovan Vraniševski.“<sup>5</sup> Jovan Vraniševski was then granted early release; the media reported that „the Russian Orthodox Church will take in the sick priest and look after his health.“<sup>6</sup>

The media also reported that Vraniševski's release after three years spent in jail was to be „ascribed to President Tomislav Nikolić as well, as he was the one to 'activate' bilateral diplomacy and was in permanently in touch with SPC Patriarch Irinej.“<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, in 2015 one should expect the two churches to renew negotiations broken in 2002. Macedonian public, generally, and the country's political and media elites will surely grudge this „barter.“ This can be concluded by the way they responded to the MPC's appeal for Vraniševski's release from prison. Only two days after his release Skopje was covered with billboards saying the authorities should put an end to „Serb assimilation of Macedonians.“ Ex-president of the VMRO-DPMNE party Ljupčo Georgievski – who walked out of the party (now in power in Macedonia) – took over

5 Politika, December 23, 2015.

6 Naše Novine, February 4, 2015.

7 Ibid.

the responsibility for billboards. He argues that „Serbization“ of Macedonians through arts, music, etc., has taken threatening proportions.<sup>8</sup>

On Macedonia's Flag Day, November 28, 2014, ethnic Albanians launched the initiative for the establishment of an Albanian eastern orthodox church. The MPC Synod responded fiercely, calling the initiative „a dangerous political manipulation veiling a nationalistic and chauvinistic scheme.“<sup>9</sup>

## POLITICAL-ESPIONAGE SCANDAL

In early 2015 Macedonia was shaken by a serious political-espionage scandal, which Premier Gruevski labeled „an attempted coup d'état.“ He accused the leader of the biggest opposition party the Social Democratic Alliance, Zoran Zaev, of having blackmailed him (wanting him to resign and form the so-called technical government) by threatening to expose some tape-recordings obtained from a certain „foreign intelligence service.“ The Macedonian Ministry of the Interior released that raising the indictment against Zaev and another three persons (including the former head of the Security and Counterintelligence Agency, Zoran Veruševski) „prevented the attempt on undermining the constitutional order and undemocratic seizure of power.“<sup>10</sup>

Reacting to the scandal Brussels and Moscow called for a „thorough investigation.“ Russia's Foreign Ministry warned that „aggravation of situation in Macedonia could trigger off dangerous escalation of ethnic conflicts in the country.“<sup>11</sup> Spokeswoman for Johannes Hahn, European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Policy, Maja Kocijančič, called the accusations „very serious“

8 Radio B92, February 5, 2015.

9 Večernje Novosti, December 3, 2014.

10 Politika, February 2, 2015.

11 Ibid.

and said the EU „expected independent and transparent investigation into the matter.“<sup>12</sup> Tomas Melia, US deputy assistant secretary of state, also paid a visit to Macedonia at the time.

„A foreign intelligence service“ and speculation about the country bugging Premier Gruevski were most intriguing in the whole affair. Zaev himself claimed not „a single neighboring country“ was involved. Nevertheless, the media in Macedonia have been pointing a finger at Greece. Ljupčo Frčkovski, ex-minister of the police, says, „The tapes have probably been obtained from the Americans.“<sup>13</sup>

## POLITICAL CRISIS IN MACEDONIA

Regardless of the scandal's international proportions and those involved (to be identified after a thorough and independent investigation), the whole affair can hardly be separated from the context of domestic developments. The accused Zaev, leader of the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia – who has been boycotting the parliament together with other opposition leaders ever since early parliamentary elections – had been blaming Gruevski for corruption and other illegal acts for some time now.

Conservative VMRO-DPMNE won both early parliamentary and presidential elections of April 2014. Though the party won absolute majority in the parliament, it formed the government in coalition with Albanian Democratic Union for Integration /DUI/. Thirty-three opposition MPs out of total 123 – practically the entire opposition – have been boycotting the parliament since claiming „rigged elections and terror of the ruling party.“

Not only the opposition but also a part of Macedonia's public opinion has been accusing

12 Ibid.

13 Danas, February 4, 2015.

VMRO-DPMNE and Gruevski of authoritarian rule. International and domestic criticism of media freedoms additionally testify of the country's half-done democratic institutions and poor democratic capacity. The case of journalist Tomislav Kožarovski is paradigmatic in this context: he has been sentenced to two-year imprisonment for two stories. Under the pressure from international and domestic public he was „transferred“ to home confinement and then again returned to the jail. Macedonian journalists campaigning for his release claim the „sentenced was passed under political pressure.“<sup>14</sup>

## SERBIA'S AMBITIONS

To all appearances Serbia plans to become more active in the case of its neighbor in the south the more so since some criticize it for having „unjustly neglected Macedonia.“<sup>15</sup>

The first step in this direction has already been made with Russian church's mediation meant to renew the dialogue between Serbia's and Macedonia's churches. Under the pretext of the threat of Albanians' growing territorial aspirations Serbia will probably try other ways to manifest its interest in the country that is for it „extremely important as a neighbor, geostrategic area and an economic partner.“

The recently published book „Balkan Triangle“ by Zoran Janačković, high-ranking intelligence officer and ambassador to Skopje in mid-1990s, serves the purpose. According to the author himself, he wrote the book to „warn of lasting threats of the Greater Albania project to Serbia and Macedonia.“ To emphasize these „threats“ the author says that by the end of the 20th century Macedonian authorities „decided to destroy Yugoslavia and thus deprive their country of the safety a strong and stable Serbia would have guaranteed.“<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSION

International factors – the EU in the first place – should pay more attention to the dynamics of developments in and about Macedonia. Escalation of the Ukrainian crisis has shifted their focus from Southeast Europe (the so-called West Balkans) to Ukraine, a shift that might produce far-reaching consequences.

The problem of Macedonia's name should be solved as soon as possible and all its neighboring countries should then respect that name and national identity.

Serbia's recognition of Kosovo's independence becomes more and more urgent: not only as a precondition for a full-fledged membership of the EU, but also as a guarantee of the region's stability. The policy of non-recognition only raises the price the Serb community in Kosovo and Serbia itself will have to pay for pursuing the policy of „manipulating and sacrificing Kosovo Serbs.“

The signature put under the Brussels Agreement was a political act ensuring the West's support to Serbia's incumbent government. The West believes that compliments and support would channel Serbia towards the EU. However, the West seems unaware how fragile is the consensus reached on the Agreement. Only de iure recognition would truly pacify the situation in Serbia and in Kosovo.

<sup>14</sup> Danas, January 20, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Politika, February 5, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Danas, February 5, 2015.