

# Helsinki bulletin



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## MACEDONIA AT THE CROSSROADS

The situation in Macedonia is has reached the critical point and is threatening in many ways: deepening of the Macedonian crisis could have a dangerous effect on the entire region; because of its sensitive geostrategic position, Macedonia has found itself in the focus of the attention of big powers, all of which heightened by Russia's and Turkey's revived ambitions, the crisis of EU and the new US administration.

Macedonia's present crisis indicates that EU and NATO no longer crucially influence the country's

politics. In today's Skopje, their suggestions, demands and under-the-table pressure seem to end up in a blind alley. And this is surely the price they have to pay for their neglect of the Balkans.

Over the two past centuries Macedonia has always been the battleground of big powers' and neighboring countries' opposing interests. As a state (a republic) in was recognized in the Second Yugoslavia as a component part of the SFR of Yugoslavia, and became an independent

country in 1993. From the very beginning it has been challenged by its neighbors, and by Russia in the Cold War era (Russia was acting via Bulgaria).

The most serious crisis broke out in 2000 when Macedonian police clashed with the members of the Albanian ethnic community. This crisis actually raised the Albanian question in Macedonia. The international community (NATO, US and EU) put an end to the crisis and mediated the signing of the Ohrid Agreement that guaranteed the Albanians' integration into Macedonian institutions.<sup>1</sup>

For two years now, Macedonia has been in deep political crisis. Its last elections – called under the agreement between four leading parties and EU's mediation – were expected to indicate the way out of the crisis. But the crisis only escalated when President Ivanov refused to entrust Zoran Zaev – who won more than one-half of parliamentary seats in the last elections – with forming the cabinet.

## MACEDONIA DENIED

It was only within SFRY that Macedonia strengthened its national identity and obtained statehood. The Macedonian Orthodox Church /MPC/ proclaimed autonomy that the Serbian Orthodox Church /SPC/ still recognizes not and thereby denies Macedonian nation.

Serbian historians claim that Macedonia, Kosovo and Raška have been called "Old Serbia" from antiquity given that was where the Serbian state was born in Middle Ages; since the Balkan Wars these regions have been named "new regions." The same historians also argue that at the time

1 The agreement between Macedonian and Albanian political representatives was signed under international supervision following on Albanian armed rebellion in 2000.

the term "a Macedonian" determined regional rather than national origin, while the local Slav and Orthodox population declared itself either Serbian or Bulgarian.<sup>2</sup>

Macedonia decided to proclaim independence when the Badintaire Commission concluded that Yugoslavia dissolved (1991) and when it became obvious that Yugoslavia could not survive. It was not internationally recognized as an independent state because Greece argued that its very name implied territorial claims on its Northern regions.<sup>3</sup>

The Badintaire Commission decided that Macedonia met all the criteria of independence. Only in 1993 it was admitted to UN under the name the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. EU member-states, Turkey and Albania recognized it shortly after that. The US recognized Macedonia in February 1994 and Russia in 1992 and under its constitutional name – the Republic of Macedonia.

Macedonia was also targeted by Serbian nationalists who saw it, along with Kosovo, the territory of "South Serbia" or "Old Serbia." If Kosovo is to be partitioned, reasoned Serbian nationalists, why not partition Macedonia as well – unless it sides with Serbia and against the Albanians? Belgrade's territorial claims on Macedonia were in the package with the "Kosovo issue."

In his memoirs Macedonian President Kiro Gligorov quoted writer Dobrica Ćosić who was opposed the international pressure for Macedonia's recognition. "You are not aware of what you are doing. This is about our people and our land, we cannot renounce the land our

2 Miloš Jagodić, historian, *Politika*, March 19, 2017.

3 Most countries recognized Macedonia under the name BJRM due to Greece's sensitivity. This postponed Macedonia's integration into Euro-Atlantic community, undermined its consolidation and added to the ongoing identity crisis.

army has shed blood for throughout history. This part of Macedonia belongs to us.”<sup>4</sup> In an interview with a Greek paper Željko Ražnatović Arkan, leader of one of Serbia’s para-military troops, said that the Serbs would “take over the-ir” part of Macedonia. Vojislav Šešelj argued that Macedonia’s partition would “finally solve” the Macedonian question and, at the same time, cut off “the Islamic arch” the Turks had built in the Balkans with the helping hand from the Americans. Serbia would take the region around Kumanovo that is “inhabited by the Serbs to whom fundamental human rights are denied,” he said, adding that Western parts “with the population of some 300,000 Albanians” could be handed over to Tirana, while regions in the East, with Bulgarian population, to Sofia. According to him, Greece could get the border strip from Bitola to Prilep, inhabited by Greeks and “Hellenized Wallachians or the so-called Cincars.”<sup>5</sup>

By invoking the Greater Albania – the idea nourished by some Albanian circles – Belgrade was actually searching for a partner for the Greater Serbia project implying revision of borders in the Balkans.

The report by intelligence sources on Belgrade’s planned attack at Kosovo forced American President George Bush to warn Milošević in a letter (the so-called Christmas warning of December 27, 1992) that the US were ready to undertake a military intervention in the case Serbia attacked the Albanians in Kosovo. The threat was repeated by President Bill Clinton on February 19, 1993, as well as by US Ambassador to UN Madeleine Albright in August 1993. “President Bush sent a clear-cut message,” she said, “we are ready to act in the case of a conflict in Kosovo caused by Serbia’s actions.”

The United States – and the West as a whole – was anxious about Macedonia. The West

4 NIN, September 13, 2001.

5 Borba, November 3, 1993.

believed that its stabilization was imperative to the prevention of a conflict that would spread all over the region. At Macedonian President Kiro Gligorov’s invitation, the UN sent several hundreds of blue helmets to Macedonia in late 1992 and early 1993; these troops were soon joined by 550 American soldiers. They were all tasked with preventing any aggressive action in the region.<sup>6</sup> Even the Yugoslav army withdrew from Macedonia and Milošević restrained himself for four years from attacking Kosovo Albanians. He continued to oppress them, however.

When in 1996 Macedonia and the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia agreed on mutual recognition, Serbian nationalists were furious. Historian Milan St. Protić was arguing, for instance, that “victims who gave their lives for Macedonia’s liberation in two Balkan wars and one world war were turned senseless by one stroke of a pen, and all glorious victories of the Serbian army, from Kumanovo to Salonika front, were crossed out.”<sup>7</sup>

## CHRONOLOGY OF THE CRISIS

Macedonia’s political scene has been shaking for two years now. After the biggest opposition party, the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM) boycotted the parliamentary elections and mass protest against the government in Skopje and other towns, in mid-2016 key political actors reached an agreement on early elections and democratic preconditions for holding them.

Early parliamentary elections were held in December 2016 but did not pacify the overall situation; on the contrary, the crisis aggravated.

6 The mission ended in 1996 when Macedonia recognized Taiwan. China denied its support to it in response to this recognition.

7 Milan St. Protić, “We and Them,” Belgrade, 1996, p. 159.

Two leading political parties, VMRO-DPMNE (in power for almost ten years) and the opposition Social Democratic Party, ended the elections almost in a tie. The ruling VMRO-DPMNE received two parliamentary seats more than the Socialists and hence considered itself a winner. Accordingly, the President of the Republic entrusted VMRO-DPMNE leader Nikola Gruevski with forming a cabinet.

Ever since the Ohrid Agreement, Macedonia has been following the principle of consentaneity implying one Albanian representative in the government. VMRO-DPMNE's partner in the former government was the biggest Albanian political party, DUI, led by Ali Ahmeti. Although everyone believed he would side with Gruevski again, Ahmeti changed his mind and left Gruevski short of parliamentary seats necessary for forming the cabinet.

And so, SDSM leader Zoran Zaev secured parliamentary majority of 67 seats (out of 120) with the assistance from Albanian partners. Everyone hope the cabinet would be formed in almost no time. However, Macedonian President Đorđi Ivanov refused to authorize Zaev to form the government and so brought the situation at the domestic arena almost to the boiling point.

## ALBANIAN FACTOR

In mass protests against Gruevski's autocratic and corrupted regime and the country's deplorable economic and social situation, the Macedonians and the Albanians participated hand in hand. That was a promising sign of a better social climate in the country divided for years by a deep interethnic gap. The outcome of the elections testified of this new phenomenon. Almost 70,000 Albanians cast their ballot for Social Democrat Zaev. This not only boosted his premiership chances but also caused turbulence within the Albanian ethnic community: Ahmeti's

up to then untouchable Democratic Alliance for Integration /DUI/ suffered a dramatic loss in votes, obtaining only 10 parliamentary seats, while Menduh Thachi's Democratic Party of Albanians got just two seats. And, the civic movement BESA with 5 seats and the Alliance for Albanians with three seats in the parliament emerged as new political factors in the Albanian bloc.

Several days after the elections Albanian Premier Edi Rama invited leaders of Albanian parties in Macedonia to Tirana for consultation. Ali Ahmeti at first turned down his invitation but changed his mind two or three days later. The outcome of Tirana talks have been veiled for long. However, analysts and observers of the situation in Macedonia noted that Ali Ahmeti, as a leader of the Albanian bloc, launched "an initiative for unification of all Albanian parties in Macedonia."<sup>8</sup>

## ALBANIAN PLATFORM

In early 2017 three Albanian parliamentary parties adopted a platform for negotiations on Macedonia's future government. In a release DUI, BESA and the Alliance for Albanians, among other things, called for recognition of the Albanian language as official, settlement of the dispute over the country's name, debate on Macedonia's national flag, anthem and insignia, as well the Albanian's equal participation in governmental institutions. Their demands were, more or less, in line with provisions of the Ohrid Agreement.

The so-called Tirana platform came into the focus of public attention only once Zoran Zaev demanded the premiership. The fact that VMRO-DPMNE leader Nikola Gruevski had accepted the post-election document of Albanian parties was being swept under the carpet. Gruevski,

<sup>8</sup> Mirko Arnaudov, Danas, December 28, 2016.

although a formal winner of the elections, had failed to secure parliamentary majority. At the time Gruevski had had nothing against the same platform when negotiating coalition with Ali Ahmeti.

Teufa Arifi, the mayor of Tetovo (referred to as a potential foreign minister in Zaev's cabinet) says that the platform has never been a secret document given that it had been published in several papers and translated into foreign languages. As for the Albanian as an official language, she claims, the platform just calls for its "extended use" under existing legal provisions; the platform calls not for any change in the national flag, anthem or insignia – it just calls for a public debate on these issues. A resolution "condemning genocide" to be adopted by the Macedonian parliament (Sobranje) would refer to all citizens, regardless of their ethnic origin. "I would like to emphasize that no one ever wanted to pinpoint any country in the region, especially not Serbia and its people that have suffered much throughout history," she said.<sup>9</sup>

"The parliamentary majority is dedicated to strengthening of the country's unity, sovereignty and stability," claims potential premier Zoran Zaev.<sup>10</sup> "It's a complete lie," he argues, that his cabinet would be after "any condemnation of other peoples." According to him, the program of his cabinet (he had presented to the public) includes not "genocide and condemnation of other nations...which is the topic of historians should discuss."<sup>11</sup>

9 Politika, March 18, 2017.

10 Politika, March 13, 2017.

11 Ibid.

## BIG POWERS AND MACEDONIA

The changes in the global arena once again brought big power to the Balkans – this time to Macedonia and Montenegro. Because of fragility of the countries in the region – Macedonia's in particular – a number of stories and analyses were warning of potential conflict in this part of the Balkans. EU High Representative for Foreign Policy Frederica Mogherini's visit to Macedonia made her realize this was truth. So, she warned that the Balkans could easily become "a chessboard for under-the-table games by big powers" and that the "region is faced with complex challenges and tensions." Political dynamics in some countries raise tensions in the region, she added. Besides, regional dynamics, along with interethnic tensions between countries, are "extremely dangerous as they can take the region couple of years back to the past," she warned, adding "Peace must never be taken for granted."<sup>12</sup>

Miroslav Lajčák, the Slovak Foreign Minister, is also concerned with the Balkans. "EU is less and less serious interlocutor about enlargement. We have left the Western Balkans in words and deeds, and now realize the consequences: two countries are faced with disintegration, and three are in deep political crisis. And the reason why it is so is that EU had not played its role as a leader, as a dialogist who should open up prospects to those countries."<sup>13</sup>

Over the past twenty-five years US, EU and NATO have endeavored to place the entire region under a single umbrella of security /NATO/ and create preconditions for its democratization

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<http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/mogherini-balkan-mozeda-postane-sahovska-tabla-za-igre-sila/8tn06l8>

13 <http://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/bivsi-visoki-predstavnik-u-bih-sef-slovsacke-diplomacije-europa-je-napustila-balkan-tamo-su-dvije-drzave-pred-raspadom-a-tri-u-dubokoj-krizi/5725583/>

(Council of Europe, SAA, accession negotiations and – membership). So far only Slovenia and Croatia managed to fully integrated into the said alliances.

EU officials have been busily visiting Balkan countries in the past couple of weeks, claiming that EU had not abandoned them and promising them “a future in Europe.” The media in the West, such as the Guardian, have been publishing quotes like the one about “Macedonia is not a country,” and running stories about the train with Serbian insignia sent to Kosovo, the referendum in RS and Bosnian Serbs’ decision to boycott Sarajevo because of its call for the revision of the decision by ICJ in The Hague, the conflict between Montenegrin opposition and regime, etc.

Indicatively, EC President Jean-Claude Juncker warned US Vice-President Mike Pence that yet another war could break out in the Balkans if EU collapsed. The region must be “offered European prospects,” he explained.<sup>14</sup>

Russia has also made use of the Macedonian crisis. Strongly present in the region, it keeps saying that Kremlin would see NATO’s further enlargement in the Balkans as a provocation. In the present crisis, Russia sided with Gruevski and accused Albania, NATO and EU of trying to impose an Albanian government on Macedonia. Russia’s Foreign Ministry released, “With the assistance from the Albanian minority, the West tries to enthrone the defeated opposition that had put its signature under the Albanians’ ultimatum that undermines the country’s constitutional system. Further destructive attempts at imposing the plans contrary to the will of Macedonian voters could only aggravate the situation.”<sup>15</sup>

14 <http://www.euractiv.rs/eu-i-zapadni-balkan/11152-junker-pensu-ako-eu-propadne-na-balkanu-e-bitu-rata>

15 <http://www.politika.co.rs/sr/clanak/375390/Rusija-Situacija-u-Makedoniji-moze-da-destabilizuje-Balkan>.

According to Macedonian analyst Dimitri Bećev, Russia tries to profit from the situation in Macedonia, like from other crises worldwide, though its influence on Skopje should not be overstated. “At the same time, Gruevski, like all other leaders in the region, tries to balance and calculate, but eventually adheres to EU policy.”<sup>16</sup> The fact that the Gruevski cabinet had recognized Kosovo despite strong reactions from Serbia testifies to this, he concludes.

Sergey Zelezniak, the deputy secretary of Russia’s ruling United Russia party, said that Russia was after making an alliance of “military neutral and sovereign countries” in the Balkans. “The Balkan foursome,” he said, would include Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia.<sup>17</sup> If EU is not aware of national interests of its member-states and candidates, including the Balkan countries, EU has no future, he argued, adding that, unfortunately, so far EU has been sticking to a mistaken practice according to which the membership of EU implies the membership of NATO.<sup>18</sup>

## MACEDONIA AND NEIGHBORS

Macedonia has been in difficulties ever since independence proclamation. Some experts call it, therefore, “provisionality” and US congresswoman Dana Rohrabacher a non-existent state to be divided between Kosovo and Bulgaria. Newly formed Balkans state have been laying claim on its territory ever since the Berlin Congress (1878).

All neighbors have been aspiring to Macedonian territory: some have denied the Macedonian

16 <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/post-scriptum-balkan-makedonija/28357181.html>.

17 <http://informer.rs/vesti/politika/107466/PUTIN-PRAVI-BALKANSKU-CETVORKU-Potvrđeno-savezu-Srbija-Crna-Gora-Makedonija-BiH>.

18 Ibid.

nation as such, while others the Macedonian language.

However, Macedonia's strongest dispute is with Greece – over its name. Athens takes that the term “Macedonia” denotes Greek region in the north, and its neighbors should look for another name. Greeks argue that Tito invented the name “the Republic of Macedonia” in 1944 as he had an eye on the Northern Greece and Salonika harbor. At the same time, Skopje authorities' assistance to the Macedonians living abroad has been bothering Athens. Namely, many Macedonians in Greece sided with communists in the civil war (1944-49) and were severely punished for it later on.<sup>19</sup>

In 1995 Skopje officially renounced any claim on the territory of its southern neighbor and pledged not to provide assistance to the Macedonians living in Greece. For its part, Greece solemnly promised that it would not undermine Macedonia's accession to international institutions under the condition it used the name “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.”

The name for Macedonia has not been agreed 22 years later despite UN mediation. Greece would not recognize Macedonian identity considering the term Macedonia its own historical heritage.

## SERBIA AND THE PRESENT SITUATION IN MACEDONIA

Following the early parliamentary elections of December 2017, Albanian parties have united and thus became decisive in forming the ruling majority and election of the Premier – either Gruevski or Zaev. Some take that their

19 Greece skips over the fact that following Turkey's expulsion from the Balkans the territory of Macedonia was dismembered; Greece appropriated “Aegean Macedonia,” Serbia “Vardar Macedonia” and Bulgaria “Pyrenean Macedonia.”

negotiating power could result in an Albanian premier.

It was in a climate as such that Belgrade decided to campaign against Macedonia, mostly because it had recognized Kosovo and stood for its membership of UNESCO. Foreign Minister Dačić said he believed in the need for developing friendly relations with Macedonia but could not pretend “not to see” that Macedonia had recognized Kosovo and voted for its membership of UNESCO, while Serbia had recognized Macedonia under its constitutional name. The Kosovo question is vital to Serbia, he said, but Macedonia had voted against it nevertheless, which “undermines our friendship.”<sup>20</sup>

Skopje labeled Dačić's statement “a small diplomatic scandal” and “nervous revanshism.” Nino Ružin, Macedonia's former Ambassador in Brussels, said, “This is an unacceptable gesture by a high official in Vučić's cabinet, known for his similar rhetoric about Croatian and Kosovo politicians.”<sup>21</sup>

Serbia's media's coverage of the situation in Macedonia – during and after the elections – was obviously in favor of Premier Gruevski. When Albanian parties denied him support, the media began campaigning against Albanian parties and the “Tirana platform.” This is also when Macedonia became a “top story” and not in the media only. Statements given by officials of the ruling party and Premier Vučić himself refer to “Macedonian scenario” as a potential threat to domestic stability (without anyone bothering to detail the meaning of the “metaphor”). Sensational stories about “Shiptar complot against Macedonia (and Serbia)” in tabloids are followed by “serious” analyses that invoke the

20 <https://rs.sputniknews.com/politika/201701031109490440-dacic-skoplje-odgovor/>.

21 <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/201701041109499395-makedonija-susedi-ivica-dacic-kosovo-saradnja/>.

Prizren League and “the Greater Albania as an eternal ambition.”<sup>22</sup> The *Pečat* magazine claims that “post-election chaos in Macedonia growingly resembles time-tested scenarios developed by NATO, US, EU and, naturally, George Soros.”<sup>23</sup> According to these scenarios, you first provoke a political crisis, which are followed by color revolutions and ultimately by civil wars.

The media are sympathetic to President Ivanov because he had “the guts to” refuse the premiership to Zaev and thus “actually sentence to death the state he is the head of.”<sup>24</sup> Serbia’s elite and the media revived their favorite topic about revision of borders in the Balkans (which would imply, without saying it openly, partition of Kosovo and incorporation of RS). And in this, they enjoy quoting various analysts from abroad, especially those arguing that banana states “are incapable of surviving, let alone meeting some more complex and more important security requirements.”

Interestingly, even some members of the so-called civic option like Alexander Popov, the director of the Center for Regionalism, are anxious about the platform. “Decentralization by ethnic principle as suggested in the platform could be very dangerous,” he says suggesting that in the case the Albanian platform is adopted Serbia should rename its southern neighbor – the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.<sup>25</sup>

Commenting on the Tirana platform historian Čedomir Antić said that Albanian parties were after a new state in which consensus between two peoples would turn into equality of their ethnically grouped municipalities; until the unnamed “Republic of Illyria” is established the Albanians would already be tutors in every institution and municipality in a country, even in

places where their number is not even symbolic. “A Macedonia as such would not dare dreaming of any policy that has not been approved in Tirana and, as things stand in Albanian, in Washington.”<sup>26</sup>

Belgrade hoped that presidents Trump and Putin would make terms about spheres of interest, and that by their deal Serbia would get Kosovo, RS, Montenegro and also a part of Macedonia. Given that President Trump has not yet come out with a clear-cut strategy for the Balkans, all of a sudden his promotion in Serbia was put to an end.

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22 Politika, March 13, 2017.

23 Pečat, No. 461/2017.

24 Politika, March 16, 2017.

25 Danas, March 8, 2017.

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26 <http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/375836/Pogledi/Makedonija-opstanak-ili-nestanak>



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The crisis in Macedonia – the most delicate geostrategic point in the region – reopened the debate on security issues and gave rise to discussions about rearrangement of the Balkans. All the efforts by EU and US in the past twenty-five years are now questioned mostly because of US's still undefined policy for the Balkans.

Some countries in the region have fears of further passivity of US – and with good reason. This would give more room to Russia and its endeavor to strengthen its influence in the Balkans through Serbia, and now through Macedonia as well. Energy supplies and export of arms to Serbia at a rather bargain price come handy to it now.

The Salonika Summit in 2003 opened up European prospects to the entire region. However, the conclusions reached have been realized at half speed despite all the investment made in the region. The fact that EU gives up its natural space and its not only major economic potential, but also security aspect in new international circumstances – is simply deplorable.

Rhetorically, EC is still committed to enlargement. However, some member-states are not exactly in favor of it, as they are preoccupied with problems of their own. Germany and Austria are still manifesting genuine interest in the region.

There is no strategic communication between EU and the Western Balkans. This lack of communication opens the door not only to Russia but also to Turkey, China and other countries that are investing far less in the region.

After twenty years of more or less unsuccessful or problematic reforms in the region, it is imperative to realistically analyze true potential of regional societies for changes.

Poor economic growth, difficult social situation in the entire Balkans, lost hopes in a better life, etc, generate frustrations and dissatisfaction nationalists are finely manipulating with while playing on anti-European card. Accession to EU – a hard and thorny road anyway – is no longer as attractive as it used to be several years ago.

Bearing all this in mind, EU should redefine its attitude towards the architecture of the Balkans it has been working on over the past 25 years so as to block regressive trends. Besides, it needs to seriously support economies of Balkan countries so as to encourage citizens throughout the region for active participation in political life. This is the only way to cut short the devastating influence of nationalistic leaders and politics.