

# Helsinki *bulletin*



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Zoran Zaev with Aleksandar Vučić, november 2017.

VLADA REPUBLIKE MAKEDONIJE

## MACEDONIA: THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE TO BELGRADE

Bilateral relations in the region were disturbingly bad in 2017. They were so bad that circles of local and international analysts have once again spoken about possible conflicts. By channeling social (domestic) grudge towards neighboring countries, mostly through media campaigns, Serbia – while its Presidents pictures it as “an anchor” of regional stability and promoter of neighborly relations – was crucially adding to regional tensions.

In this context, Macedonia was Belgrade’s biggest challenge throughout 2017; and mostly because Macedonia is perceived as a major geopolitical crossroad not only for Serbia but for the entire South Balkans as well. Although Belgrade had walked out of Macedonia peacefully (YPA withdrew in April 1992), Macedonia remained a lasting aspiration of Serbian nationalists.<sup>1</sup>

1 On December 27, 1992 intelligence report on Belgrade’s plan to attack Kosovo forced American President George W. Bush to address the so-called

When in 1996 Macedonia and (the then) SRY opted for mutual recognition Serbian nationalists were furious. For instance, historian Milan St. Protić was arguing, "One stroke of pen turned insignificant all the suffering experienced when Macedonia was being liberated in two Balkan wars and one world war, all the victories of Serbian army from Kumanovo to Salonika front were crossed off."<sup>2</sup>

Serbian nationalists perceived their claims on Macedonia's territory in the context of the Kosovo question. In his memoirs, Macedonian President Kiro Gligorov quotes Ćosić who opposed international pressure on Slovenia to recognize Macedonia, "You are not aware of what you are doing, this is our people and our land, we cannot renounce the territory for which our army has been blooded throughout history. This part of Macedonia belongs to us."<sup>3</sup> Arkan told the Greek paper *Ethnos* that the Serbs would "take over their part of Macedonia."<sup>4</sup> And Šešelj said that partition of Macedonia would "finally solve" the Macedonian question and, at the same time, cut off the "Islamic arc" the Turks had built in the Balkans with American assistance.

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Christmas warning to Milošević, informing him that the US would intervene should Serbia go for ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. President Bill Clinton repeated this threat on February 19, 1993 and US Ambassador to UN Madeline Albright made no bones about it in the Security Council. Secretary of State Christopher Warren said the same.

The US, the same as the West, was worried about Macedonia's fate. The West believed that Macedonia's stabilization was crucial to ending further spread of conflicts in 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; they were soon joined by some 550 American soldiers. These troops were supposed to prevent aggressive behavior in the region. .

- 2 Milan St. Protić, *Mi i Oni*, Hrišćanska misao, Belgrade, 1996, p. 159.
- 3 NIN, September 13, 2001.
- 4 Borba, December 14. 1993.

ce. According to him, Serbia would take the area around Kumanovo, "with Serbs living there and deprived of all human rights;" further on, he claimed, parts in the West "with some 300,000 Albanians" could be handed to Tirana, while the territories in the East with Bulgarian population – to Sofia; as for Greece, it could be given the "borderline area from Bitola to Prilep, which is populated with Greeks and Wallachians converted to Hellenism, the so-called Cincari."<sup>5</sup>

Although no one speaks so openly about Macedonia nowadays, one should bear in mind that Serbian nationalists still deny Macedonia and Kosovo as independent states. Probably this is best illustrated by the fact that Serbia's Ambassador to Macedonia, twice in a row, was Zoran Janačković, the former head of the State Security Service and chief of diplomatic secret service. In 1996 Serbia recognized Macedonia under its constitutional name, but Macedonia stance about sovereignty of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) in the case of Kosovo status remained a stumbling block of bilateral relations; as of lately, the same can be said about Macedonia's support to Kosovo's membership of international organizations, especially UNESCO.

Serbian nationalists take that Macedonians were more than cooperative when it comes to resolution of the Kosovo issue and make every concession to Albanians. They also see the Ohrid Agreement as the first stage in disintegration of the Macedonian state.<sup>6</sup> Their open benevolence to the ideology of Greater Albania and chauvinism against the Serbia and Slovenes in general was directly jeopardizing not only Republika Srpska but also the Republic of Macedonia.<sup>7</sup>

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5 Borba, November 3, 1993.

6 Pečat, February 23, 2018.

7 Slavenko Terzić, "Makedonija u 20. veku", u *Balkanski trougao* (Zoran Janačković), Zavod za udžbenike, Belgrade, 2014

## BELGRADE'S ROLE IN MACEDONIAN ELECTIONS IN 2017

Serbia deeply involved itself into Skopje turbulence but in doing it missed not only "the target and subject" but also strongly disturbed its years-long relatively good relations with its neighbor in the south.<sup>8</sup> Namely, during the post-election crisis that was shaking Macedonia for months because Premier Nikola Gruevski, with the helping hand from President Djordjije Ivanov (both of the then ruling VMRO-DPMNE party) refused to hand over the government to the newly elected majority headed by Zoran Zaev and his Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM). Belgrade was siding with Ivanov-Gruevski tandem.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, open, especially media siding with wrong "players," as it turned out, was accompanied by nontransparent activity of intelligence services. As breaking news, Belgrade withdrew all the staff from its Embassy in Skopje trying to provoke a drama that ended in a farce after a couple of days (and phone calls made at the highest level) because the staff was returned to the Embassy without any explanation.<sup>10</sup>

Due to its delicate geostrategic position, its neighbors traditional aspirations (Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria and Albania), new geostrategic interests, its own unfinished transition, overwhelming corruption, weak institutions and lack of democratic mechanisms, Macedonia has been the most neuralgic point in the Balkans over the past couple of years. However, when the

post-electoral crisis was settled – wherein the role of American diplomat Bryan Hoyt Lee was crucial – and new government constituted with Premier Zoran Zaev political and social situation in Macedonia is being gradually consolidated; to this external factors are also contributing, mostly through stronger presence of representatives of the Western international community.

In the second half of 2017 the West indentified Macedonia's instability and the potential danger of its spread on the region with Russia's stronger presence (here Russia also acted through Serbia and with its help). Therefore, it decided to reactivate its presence in the region. In the case of Macedonia, this implies a speed-up of the country's membership of NATO (along with opening the avenues towards its faster movement towards the EU).

The scenario implied additional pressure on Greece that has been obstructing the solution to Macedonia's name for almost three decades. Finally, in early 2018, Macedonian and Greek premiers, Zaev and Tsipras (both leftists unlike their predecessors) came to open the door to the solution to be phrased officially before this summer. That would even formally open to Skopje the road towards NATO it could join, as the 29th member-state, by the end of 2018.

## ASSUAGEMENT OF POLITICAL SITUATION

The years-long political crisis was untangled in mid-2017 when, after a six-month refusal to step down, Macedonian President Ivanov finally handed over premiership to the leader of a new parliamentary majority, social-democrat Zoran Zaev.<sup>11</sup> Ivanov had been exposed to strong

<sup>8</sup> Danas, May 5, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> The West and Russia were both carefully monitoring the turmoil. The West sided with Zaev and his party, while Moscow – the same as Belgrade – stood by Gruevski and Ivanov and their čelnika VMRO-DPMNE.

<sup>10</sup> Member of the Serbian Embassy's staff in Skopje Goran Živaljević, in charge of intelligence, was among violent protesters, supporters of Gruevski, who broke into the Assembly.

<sup>11</sup> Leader of the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia Zoran Zaev has been for more than a year at the head of citizens' protest against Premier Gruevski's corrupted

international pressure to do so: for long he had ignored the EU's mediation and appeals for respect of democratic procedure and then changed his mind only after the visit to Skopje by American diplomat Bryan H. Lee.

Nationalistic-conservative VMRO-DPMNE was badly defeated in regular local elections held in October 2017. Zaev's SDSM won in Skopje and in 56 localities where they appointed mayors, while VMRO-DPMNE won just 5 mayoralties (till then they had 51).<sup>12</sup> Albanian parties won local elections in the rest.

The support the new government was getting from the grassroots strengthened the standing of the Socialist Democrat Premier and made it possible for him to engage himself dynamically in domestic, regional and international politics. Resolute to reset relations with Bulgaria, give a hand of friendship to Belgrade, settled the longstanding dispute with Greece, assist Kosovo's membership of international relations, join NATO as early as in 2018 (despite strong reactions from Moscow he admits) and start accession negotiations with the EU (Macedonia became a candidate back in 2004 but has been put on ice since), Zoran Zaev has been seen as one of most promising leaders in the region.

This means not, however, that the present regime has solved all the problems at home. As some analysts argued at the time the SDSM was taking over the governance, "it is (was) naïve to believe that everything would be over just once

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and autocratic rule; early elections were called in late 2016 to ease the tension; two biggest parties, VMRO-DPMNE and Zaev's Social Democratic Alliance won about the same number of parliamentary seats, but Zaev managed to form parliamentary majority with three ethnic Albanian parties. Before a new cabinet was constituted VMRO-DPMNE supporters forced their way into the parliament; among them was, as it turned out, a member of Serbia's diplomatic mission to Skopje, Goran Živaljević.

<sup>12</sup> Politika, October 31, 2017.

the regime that has criminally ruled the country for eleven years was gone."<sup>13</sup> The defeated side is relying in the first place on personal and party wealth at its disposal.<sup>14</sup>

Although Gruevski resigned after his party's defeat in local elections and stepped down the party "throne," VMRO-DPMNE still has legitimate mechanisms to obstruct the newly formed government. It has President Ivanov who has been staunchly blocking settlement of major problems, which would have contributed to consolidation of the domestic scene.

For instance, he tried (yet without success) to obstruct the very trial to the leader of ruffians who had forced their way into the parliament in 2017. And then, using his authorities, denied putting his signature under the law on languages providing larger official use of the Albanian language in Macedonia (whereby the Albanian language would actually become the second official language in the country).<sup>15</sup> The law had to be returned to the parliament only to be met by VMRO-DPMNE MPs who submitted proposals for over 30,000 amendments.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Novi magazin, June 1, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> According to the Washington-seated „Global Financial Integrity," more than five billion dollars have leaked from Macedonia through criminal and corruptive transactions over the past 10 years; VMRO-DPMNE is among the richest parties in Europe, richer than, say, Angela Merkel's CDU. Novi magazin, June 1, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> "Instead of just and generally accepted laws passed in the spirit of dialogue, life together and a multiethnic society, we adopted an unjust and repressive law that favors the Albanian language," said Ivanov. Danas, January 19, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> The obstruction is obviously planned to prolong the discussion about unsigned law as much as possible, more than six months, some analysts say.

## RESOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM OF NAME IN SIGHT

As it seems, Macedonia-Greece longstanding dispute over the name would be settled soon.<sup>17</sup> This is evident in intensive Skopje-Athens diplomatic activity, engagement of Mathew Nimetz, but also by strong reactions and protests of conservative parties and movements in Greece.

International actors involved in stabilizing the situation in Macedonia and its international positioning over the past couple of months want to have the country's name taken off the agenda at long last. The year 2018 is crucial in this context: namely, parliamentary elections due in Greece in 2019 may result in the rightists (New Democracy) victory over the Social Democrat Syriza and resumed dispute over Macedonia's name.

Macedonian and Greek premiers, Zaev and Tsipras met at the margins of the World Economic Forum in Davos in early 2018 when they stressed out "mutual responsibility for resolution of the 25-year long dispute over the name..."<sup>18</sup>

UN negotiator Mathew Nimetz also visited both Athens and Skopje in early 2018. He said different proposals for the name were on the table, political parties were at odds and general public dissatisfied, but everyone is duty-bound to "be realistic and ready for making a compromise."<sup>19</sup> Now we have a historical chance to finally settle a years-long dispute, he stated.<sup>20</sup>

Even if already reached a solution acceptable to both sides is kept in the dark. Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kossias said recently that he

had developed a 7-point plan for Macedonia.<sup>21</sup> According to him, Greece would accept a name with geographic reference; „Either Upper Macedonia, North Macedonia, Vardar Macedonia or Macedonia-Vardar."<sup>22</sup> Anyway, as a signal of good will and proof of no territorial aspirations for Greece (with its northern region called Macedonia), Skopje changed the name of the airport named Alexander of Macedonia, as well as the name of the highway towards Greece into the „Friendship“ highway.

Settlement to the problem of Macedonia's name would be a giant's stride towards the country's international positioning: it could be able to join NATO in 2018 and finally open accession negotiations with the EU. Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva said she hope this would take place during her country's chairmanship of the EU (first six months in 2018) given that Western Balkan countries were important to the EU's geopolitical security – if the EU was not present there, „someone else would."<sup>23</sup> „Turkey and Russia have been interested in the region for decades, which is why we have to demonstrate our political support for Western Balkan countries indicating that the doors would be open to them," she explained.

## SERBIA-MACEDONIA RELATIONS

Occasional incidents in bilateral relations as of 2016 – mostly due to Belgrade's anxiousness over Skopje support to Kosovo's admission to international organizations, UNESCO in the first place – in 2017 escalated into a serious crisis. Hardly to be proved, but evident by many indicators, what caused the crisis was Belgrade's meddling into Macedonian domestic turmoil.

17 In an interview with Greek TV Alfa Premier Zaev said he believed the problem of Macedonia's name would be solved in the first half of 2018, by July at latest. Politika, January 9, 2018.

18 Ibid.

19 Politika, January 30, 2018.

20 Ibid.

21 Blic, February 18, 2018.

22 Ibid.

23 Politika, January 13, 2018.

Even since the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power the ruling Nikolić-Vučić tandem cherished harmonious relations with their Macedonian counterparts Ivanov and Gruevski and their VMRO-DPMNE. Their sympathies for the ruling structure in Skopje was manifest during long protests against the authoritarian and corrupted regime, headed throughout Macedonia for nearly two years by leader of the opposition Social Democratic Alliance, Zoran Zaev.<sup>24</sup>

Bilateral tensions intensified in the spring of 2017 during Macedonia's post-electoral crisis (that broke out when President Ivanov refused to hand over the premiership to Zaev who had managed to ensure parliamentary majority with three Albanian parties). Almost all of Belgrade's media close to the incumbent regime showed understanding for Ivanov for not be willing to hand have the premiership to "someone who destroys the country's sovereignty"<sup>25</sup> and so "sign a death sentence to the country he is the President of."<sup>26</sup> They pictured Zaev as an accomplice in "Shiptar complot against Macedonia (and Serbia)"<sup>27</sup>

Judging by everything, the media in Belgrade were not the only ones biased about the ongoing developments in Macedonia. Serbia acted along the same lines through intelligence channels and was caught red-handed when it turned out that a member of Skopje Embassy

staff, Goran Živaljević, intelligence officer, was among Gruevski's supporters who had forced their way into the Macedonian Parliament.<sup>28</sup>

These weird „spy games“ had a follow-up a couple of months later when Belgrade, all of a sudden, withdrew the entire staff of its Skopje-seated Embassy. Referring to this unprecedented action Belgrade's tabloids were accusing the Macedonian side of having spied the Embassy staff and doing the same on the territory of Serbia.<sup>29</sup> The diplomatic scandal that caused all this hue and cry in the first place, explained also by media arguments about „another stab in Serbia's back by the Macedonian government“ chilled out in almost no time:<sup>30</sup> after Vučić-Zaev phone call the government issued a release on „a five-point agreement“ whereby „Serbia and Macedonia are duty-bound to protect, in good will and on friendly basis, the rights in interests of diplomatic-consular representations on their respective territories.“<sup>31</sup>

After the release some commentators called „calming, pompous but shallow“<sup>32</sup> the Embassy staff was returned to Skopje. What had really been behind this, another scandal in a row was never revealed, which left room enough to various guesses. Some officials in Brussels expressed their doubts, off the record, that on behalf of Russia Serbia was trying to destabilize the newly formed government in its neighborhood; „the fact that a couple of hours before the decision on the staff's withdrawal was made se Vučić had met with Russian Ambassador in Belgrade Alexander Chepurin barely denies these allegations,“ wrote journalist for the Vreme weekly Dejan Anastasijević.<sup>33</sup>

24 Officials in Belgrade were accusing the opposition of planning „a Macedonian scenario,“ alluding thus to the protests in the neighboring country, so as to oust the regime „in the streets.“

25 Danas, March 2, 2017

26 Politika, March 17, 2017.

27 The media close to the regime were insisting on the fact that following the elections all ethnic Albanian parties visited Tirana at the invitation by Albanian Premier Edi Rama; their meeting with the Premier was focused on Albanian parties' participation in Macedonian political life, and the need for their more active engagement for better living conditions and the status of the Albanian ethnic community in Macedonia (the so-called Tirana Platform). .

28 Zaev was injured on this occasion. .

29 „We have proof enough about most offensive activities against Serbian institutions,“ said President Vučić; Politika, August 22, 2017.

30 Ibid.

31 Politika, August 24, 2017.

32 Danas, August 26-27, 2017.

33 Vreme, August 24, 2017.

When Belgrade-Skopje tensions colled out at the surface at least, Premier Zaev paid a visit to Belgrade in Novemmber. On that occasion he stressed out the closeness between Macedonian and Serbian peoples, which „duty-bounds politicians to promote bilateral cooperation.“<sup>34</sup> Apart from Vučić, he met with his formal counterpart Premier Ana Brnabić; the two agreed to continue the practice of holding mutual meetings of two cabinets. This has not taken place so far.

## SPC AND THE QUESTION OF MACEDONIAN CHURCH

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) argues that the establishment of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MPC) smashed its unity and was meant not only to destroy it but was also a part of the policy for disuniting Serbian historical territories in generally, mostly the territory of the Old Serbia.<sup>35</sup> The church-people's assembly held in 1958 decided on "renewal of the old Macedonia-Ohrid Archbishopric." Three bishoprics were constituted: the one of Skopje, Prespan-Bitola and of Zletovo-Strumica. A resolution passed on the occasion quotes, "The Macedonian Orthodox people, through their delegates from all over Macedonia, decides to renew the Ohrid Archbishopric as a independent Macedonian church not to be subordinated to any other church beyond Constantinople." The MPC was named St. Kliment Orhid Archbishopric. The SPC was trying to place the MPC back under canonic order. However, the MPC demanded to be autocephalous; the SPC turned this down in May 1967. The MPC convened a church-people's assembly and proclaimed itself autocephalous in July 1967.

34 Danas, November 22, 2017.

35 Slavenko Terzić, "Makedonija u 20. veku", u Balkanski trougao (Zoran Janačković), Zavod za udžbenike, Belgrade, 2014

All the attempts since to make the two churches settle their dispute failed. The SPC would never recognize an autocephalous MPC, not even after Macedonia's independence. In the meantime Macedonia and Bulgaria have "reset" their bilateral relations (which was probably devastating to Belgrade). Namely, in the summer of 2017 premiers Zaev and Borisov signed the Agreement on Friendship and Cooperation that scored a major political point to Zaev. Though not formally, the Bulgarian side recognized de facto the Macedonian language (which it had been denying for decades claiming Macedonians were actually speaking Bulgarian): the said agreement was signed in "both languages."

Belgrade's failed policy pursued (or headed) by the SPC was also manifest when the MPC decided to turn to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church asking it to take it under its wing as "a mother church."<sup>36</sup> Although this entails just a possible, complex and long-term process, no doubt that the very action shook the Patriarchate in Belgrade – which commented on it nothing publicly.<sup>37</sup>

## SERBIAN MINORITY IN MACEDONIA

The Serbian minority issue has always been placed on the agenda so as to accuse Macedonia of assimilating it and paying no heed to the rights guaranteed to all the minorities under the Ohrid Agreement. The Serbian side argues that dissolution of schools in the Serbian language after Yugoslavia's disintegration and lacking textbooks in the Serbian, the small teaching staff and the end of media communication with Serbia wiped

36 SPC has never even recognized Macedonia's independence; since Orthodox churches are national and symbolize national origins that means that it also denies the Macedonian nation.

37 Patriarch of Moscow and Russia Cyril had his say instead: according to Belgrade's media he was against this initiative.

off the Serbian language in everyday life, even in Serbian families, especially in those of mixed marriages; therefore, younger generations do not even speak Serbian. According to the 1994 census, 40,228 Serbs lived in Macedonia, while eight years later (2002) the figure fell to 35,939.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, the Serbs in Macedonia have become a major sociopolitical factor over the past years. The St. Sava Day was legally proclaimed their national day. Besides, an agency for the rights of minority communities was formed, and the Serbian language recognized as official in three municipalities. A statue of Tsar Dušan was erected in his once capital, the monument in Zebrenjak was placed under national protection and marking of the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Kumanovo staged. The number of Serbs working as public servants grew one third in the past couple of years.<sup>39</sup>

Macedonian Serbs were very engaged in the protests against the so-called Tirana Platform, i.e. handing over the governance to Zaev. Ivan Stoilković, the leader of the Democratic Party of Serbs, the only Serbian party in Macedonian, claims that Serbs are “segregated, isolated and unprotected.” “This is why we support these protests against the Tirana platform,” he said. According to him, the Macedonian people would not allow this platform to take root in their country as it provides the same rights to Albanians and Macedonians. “This plan implemented in any form means exclusion of Serbs from the state they take as theirs. Logically, we side with Macedonians as we could not possibly withstands living on the Albanian side should there be a conflict between Macedonians and Albanians.”<sup>40</sup>

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38 Ljubica Jančeva and Aleksandar Litovski “Macedonia: Identity-Building,” in “Yugoslavia from Historical Perspective,” Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2017.

39 <http://www.koreni.rs/u-makedoniji-srbi-opet-za-sve-krivi/>.

40 Ibid.

On November 17-19, 2017 the Alliance of Serbs in Romania organized in Timisoara a conference of Serbian organizations under the title “Serbs in the Region and Serbia: Perspectives.” Secretary General of the President of Republic Nikola Selaković, and Marijana Maraš and Vesna Matic of the parliamentary Committee for Diaspora and Serbs in the region attended it.

Serbian representatives from the region told the conference their position was most problematic in Croatia, Macedonia and Montenegro. Serbs from Macedonia called the Macedonian government perfidious in its attitude toward the Serbian minority and accused it of the plan for smashing it. They claimed they were exposed to systematic discrimination and structural violence, and called Serbia’s diplomacy negligent and responsible for their difficulties.<sup>41</sup>

Historian Čedomir Antić claims that one hundred years ago one third of population on the territory of today’s Macedonia considered itself Serbian. “Today they make up just several percents of local citizens. However, thanks to dedication of the Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia and other popular institutions, their unity and consciousness about to what elected representatives are duty-bound, Serbs managed – regardless of all external pressure and decades-long hostility for them and Serbia – to strike an agreement with the official Macedonia,” he said.<sup>42</sup>

Ever since Zaev took over the government the Serbian minority community, having stayed at the side of Gruevski, has been arguing that Serbs are discriminated against in Macedonia.

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41 <http://www.rts.rs/page/rtssr/Dijaspورا/story/1518/vesti/2948442/srbi-u-regionu---polozaj-i-perspektive.html>.

42 Politika, February 13, 2017.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The situation in Macedonia is being gradually consolidated after years-long domestic crisis.

This made it possible for Macedonia to actively step onto the international scene and clearly denote its orientation towards Euro-Atlantic integration.

International players considerably contributed to appeasement and are actively engaged in settling the country's crucial foreign policy question – its name.

Should the dispute with Greece (over the name) be settled by mid-2018 as expected, Macedonia could become the next Balkan country in the membership of NATO by the end of this year. This would at least partially compensate for Macedonia's disappointment with the EU Strategy for the Western Balkans whereby it is placed in the "third ring" together with Bosnia-Herzegovina (Serbia and Montenegro are in the "first ring").

Serbia's attitude towards the newly formed cabinet is still ambivalent, especially when it comes to that cabinet's stance about Kosovo and Albanians in general. Belgrade has been playing on Serbian minority communities in all the countries in the region, including Macedonia.