

Helsinki *bulletin*



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Alexis Tsipras, Zoran Zaev and foreign ministers of Macedonia and Greece signing the agreement, June 2018.

Foto: FoNet/AP

MACEDONIA AND MONTENEGRO: CONSOLIDATING THE SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN THE BALKANS

Montenegro became a full-fledged member of NATO in 2017, while the door to it was opened to Macedonia once it signed the historical agreement with Greece and has already received an official invitation from NATO. KFOR's presence in Kosovo and NATO's in some Bosnian institutions left Serbia as an isolated island all surrounded by NATO.

Serbia, the biggest country in the region, refusing to acknowledge the realities (new states) is lagging behind and losing an opportunity to join regional and European integrations. Having turned its back to Macedonia and Montenegro it manifested its inability to renounce Milošević's defeated policy, as historian Nikola Samardžić put it.¹ Belgrade's attitude towards Macedo-

¹ Danas, April 27, 2018.

nia and Montenegro in past couple of months just laid bare its bullish disturbance of regional relations, especially with nations “closest to Serbia” (Montenegrins and Macedonians). Having sided with Russia and its under-the-counter dealings in the Balkans, Serbia’s credibility in both Skopje and Podgorica is spiraling down.

Two smallest Yugoslav republics, Macedonia and Montenegro, join, step by step, the club of serious candidates for Euro-Atlantic integration, blocking at the same time all potential aspirations to their territories, national identities, religion or name.²

Macedonia and Montenegro are now “sponsoring” new winds in the Balkans and denying, in a way, the “curse of the Balkans”.³ Despite all obstruction – at home and from abroad – both have attained their goals in a different way: Montenegro due to patiently longstanding “steering” of Milo Đukanović and his Democratic Party of Socialists /DPS/ in power since 1990; and Macedonia turbulently and actually only as of early 2017 when Zoran Zaev’s Socio-democratic Alliance of Macedonia /SDSM/ ousted Nikola Gruevski’s corrupted VMRO-DPMNE regime getting closer and closer to Russia in the past years.

The steps forward by Macedonia and Montenegro against today’s international constellation are of major geostrategic dimensions.

Russia’s growing meddling into Balkan developments made Western players (US, especially) resume their interest in the Balkans: the effects

are good. Spurring overcoming of frozen conflicts prevents other players from manipulating them and spreading their influence on the region.

GREEK-MACEDONIAN HISTORICAL AGREEMENT

The agreement Macedonian and Greek governments made on (re)naming a former Yugoslav republic Northern Macedonia is of historical significance: not only for two signatory states but also for regional and continental stability. According to experts in international law and relations, Tsipras and Zaev “created a model for resolution of identity crises all over the world.”⁴

After a 27-year dispute over name Greece and Macedonia reached an agreement on June 17 (in the village of Psarades in North Greece) signed by two foreign ministers and in the presence of both premiers and European high officials. “Today we look in the eyes of the history of our nations by doing our patriotic duties,” said Alexis Tsipras on the occasion.⁵ “We are putting across a message of European manners and behavior that we, in the Balkans, are fully entitled to become a part of Europe,” said Zoran Zaev.⁶

Greece acknowledged “Macedonian language” and “Macedonian citizen” denotations. Visiting professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade Dragan Đukanović says that the agreement “opens the doors to the entire Western Balkans...now that Greece recognized Macedonian identity, including national denotation and Macedonian language for the first time.”⁷

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- 2 Recalling all the controversies and complexities of the “Macedonian question,” some analysts quoted commentaries Macedonian media run in 2011: “Macedonia is a country with Greek name, Serbian church, Bulgarian people and language and 26 percent of Albanian population.” Danas, June 22, 2018.
- 3 Albanian Premier Edi Rama at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia, TV N1, May 18, 2018

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- 4 American “Foreign Policy” magazine nominates Tsipras and Zaev for the Nobel Prize for Peace; Blic, June 17, 2018.
- 5 Politika, June 18, 2018.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Novi magazin, June 21, 2018.

International circles welcomed the Greek Macedonian agreement: messages of congratulations came from Federica Mogherini, Johannes Hahn, Donald Tusk, Jens Stoltenberg, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, as well as from American diplomat Matthew Nimetz who has mediated between Athens and Skopje for 27 years. Fifteen different names have circulated over almost three decades. Some players have paid dear for resisting pressures: in an assassination attempt late President Gligorov lost an eye and his chauffeur.⁸

Belgrade's daily *Politika* writes that the first President of Macedonia, named then Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kiro Gligorov "will go down the history for saving the Republic of Macedonia as a state and its territorial integrity devoid of territorial aspirations to the region of Macedonia" (in Greece).⁹

OPPONENTS ON BOTH SIDES

Opposition parties in both countries militate against the agreement. They speak as one when arguing that it is all about "capitulation" (Greece surrendered its region while Macedonia the whole country). Both faced with strong opposition, the two premiers were in delicate position; they were both under constant pressure of bigger or small-scale protests staged by dissatisfied opposition parties.

Zoran Zaev has to cope with yet another problem – President of the Republic Ivanov from the former ruling regime. The latter is strongly against any agreement on the country's name. He has refused to put his signature under the

declaration on a new name after the Macedonian parliament ratified the agreement with majority vote. Ivanov renounced the agreement as "unconstitutional" under the pretext that it jeopardized "Macedonian national identity, specificity of the Macedonian nation, Macedonian language and Macedonian model of coexistence."¹⁰

The new name for the country is supposed to be verified at a referendum Zoran Zaev had promised to hold in September; according to the agreement Macedonia should also change its Constitution. The biggest part of the international community (Western) has already acknowledged the name in official communication. Greece promised to support Macedonia to open up accession negotiations with the EU and apply for the membership of NATO.

SERBIA'S ATTITUDE

Having refrained from congratulating Greece and Macedonia on the agreement Belgrade clearly indicates who it sides with. Foreign Minister Đačić's brief comment about having "nothing to congratulate on" shows that Belgrade is distancing itself from Premier Zoran Zaev. This has nothing to do with Belgrade's "unclear conscience" about meddling into Macedonian crisis in 2017-17,¹¹ but rather about its not giving up yet the plan for Macedonia's destabilization, as

8 *Politika*, 15 June 2018; the author also reminds of tragic death of Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski in an air crash in the vicinity of Mostar. .

9 *Politika*, June 17, 2018.

10 *Politika*, June 27, 2018; anyway, it is unclear whether the President's signature is necessary at all from the angle of international law given that Macedonian Constitution provides that the government shall govern the country, not the President; it is also unclear whether after the Parliament's votes (and again votes in) a law on a new name the President has to put his signature under a relevant decree (as provided under the Constitution) since he is insisting now on absolute (two-third) majority of vote in the Parliament.

11 As a member of the staff of Serbian Embassy in Skopje Goran Živaljević of the State Security Service was among the VMRO-DPMNE protesters who broke into

growing presence of Serbia's intelligence services in Macedonia testifies of.¹²

Throughout the almost two-year crisis shaking Macedonian political scene Alexander Vučić was siding with Gruevski and his VMRO-DPMNE. Judging by everything, they are still close. Stressing out that he supported any agreement Macedonia and Greece might reach, Vučić also said, "Serbia also has to respect the stands of President of Macedonia Ivanov."¹³ And this was quite contrary to what Bulgarian leadership said. When Ivanov went to Sofia after refusing to sign the declaration on his country's new name, Bulgarian Premier Bojko Borisov refused to meet with him explaining that Bulgaria did not want to interfere into Macedonian affairs and that he saw "no point in his government's involvement in domestic disputes in Skopje."¹⁴

Regardless of how much Macedonian Premier Zaev has been trying to normalize relations with all neighboring countries, especially with Serbia (he paid an official visit to in November 2017), the two countries are still keeping their distance. This is evidenced in the fact that a session of the two governments announced for early 2018 has not been convened yet under the pretext that the situation of Serbian minority in Macedonia has worsened since a change in the government. Serb leader in Macedonian, MP Ivan Stoilković claims that "relations between Serbia and Macedonia are at the lowest level possible."¹⁵ "The trend of transforming the Republic of Macedonia into a single society is disputable to us as it implies a change in the name under which Alba-

nians will remain Albanians, while Macedonians and all other ethnic communities become citizens without national identity."¹⁶ Miroslav Lazanski, the commentator for the *Politika* daily and MP from the ruling coalition, calls the agreement on the name Macedonians' "self-humiliation." He argues that Macedonia is facing the threat of "Kosovo scenario" because "with or without a new name, the national crisis is about to culminate."¹⁷

Historical agreement between Macedonia and Greece caught Serbia unawares. This is evident in media coverage of negotiations abundant in stories about mass and fierce protests in both countries, especially in Greece. There have also been some hints about a possible crisis of the Greek government and standing of Premier Tsipras.¹⁸ Headlines in mainstream media were strongly indicative, saying "New Protests in Greece against a Name for Macedonia," "Zoran Zaev's Necktie as Possible Noosed Rope for Tsipras," etc. Every gesture by President Ivanov has been given strong publicity, especially his refusal to accept the agreement his government had reached.

SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND SETTLEMENT OF MACEDONIA'S INTERNATIONAL STATUS

The Serbian Orthodox Church /SPC/ did not officially comment on the change in Macedonia's name. The SPC is sticking to its point: it would not allow autocephaly to the Macedonian Orthodox Church /as of 1967). It has after

the Macedonian parliament in April 2017; Helsinki Bulletin 131.

12 According to an analysis by the International Institute for Balkan and Middle East Studies in Ljubljana, Aleksandar Vučić - Ivica Dačić tandem is destabilizing Macedonia, directly and indirectly. .

13 *Politika*, June 28, 2018.

14 *Danas*, June 22, 2018.

15 *Politika*, May 24, 2018

16 *Politika*, May 25, 2018.

17 Column titled "A Lost Nation," *Politika*, June 2, 2018.

18 The headline referring to Tsipras' necktie illustrates the way the media are interpreting his political future; *Politika*, June 19, 2018; (the headline alludes to a necktie Zoran Zaev presented to his Greek counterpart after the two signed the agreement).

destabilization of Macedonian scene through its Archbishopric in Macedonia.

Recent appeal by the Patriarch of Constantinople Bartolomмео to “sister” churches to embrace “the church in Skopje” within Eastern Orthodoxy tempted the SPC. About the same appeal the Patriarch sent for recognition of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (the Russian Orthodox Church is strongly against it). According to some commentators Patriarch Bartolomмео risks a schism in the world of Eastern Orthodoxy by taking steps as such.

Only Bishop of Bačka Irinej commented on the Patriarch’s appeal saying that autocephaly of the Macedonian church (and Ukrainian too) would be a big mistake. He takes that Patriarch Bartolomмео’s predisposition for “some one-sided and independent decision-making” would “manifest a serious delusion, stand for a gross spiritual mistake and – from the angle of the hierarchy of the Eastern Orthodox Church and Canon Law – null and void.”¹⁹

The Macedonian Orthodox Church /MPC/ has been battling for its autocephaly (independence) at several frontlines. In late 2017 its highest dignitaries sent a letter to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church pleading it to become “a mother church” to the MPC and as such assist in having its autocephaly canonically confirmed.²⁰ According to Belgrade-seated media “unexpected” closeness of the two churches was preceded by a political agreement between premiers Borisov and Zaev

who had met just several days before the Bulgarian church accepted to act as an advocate for the MPC and its canonic status.²¹

MONTENEGRO SUCCESSFULLY MARCHES ALONG EURO-ATLANTIC COURSE

For two decades has Montenegro been marching towards Euro-Atlantic integrations, patiently and in a well-planned way. It has made several breakthroughs: it became the 29th member-state of NATO in 2017, and made significant progress in the process of accession to the EU. What is also most important – it has put a stop to the dispute over borderline with Kosovo.²²

During 2017 Montenegro also considerably neutralized activism by pro-Serbian opposition parties whose involvement in preparations for a coup d’état in 2016 rather disqualified them and shrunk their maneuver space for undermining the Democratic Party of Socialists and Milo Đukanović. This also badly affected Belgrade’s and Moscow’s influence on and activities in the country. Harmonious relations between the majority Montenegrin people and minorities (Bosniak, Albanian, etc.) make a gradual development of a democratic, civic and plural society possible. This also singles out Montenegro from its neighbors. “Đukanović has become a model leader who has successfully replaced Montenegro’s identity – whatever it might have

¹⁹ Politika, June 20, 2018.

²⁰ „In the situation when the MPC recognizes the BPC for its mother-church, the BPC – bearing in mind its holy duty – takes upon itself to offer full cooperation, mediation and advocacy among other sister churches, and take all necessary steps for recognition of a canonic status for the MPC,” released the BPC Synod on the occasion; Novi magazin, November 30, 2017.

²¹ Politika November 29, 2018.

²² Montenegro broke with Milošević’s regime (1997), walked out of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro thus restoring its statehood and independence (2006), recognized Kosovo’s independence (2008) and settled the borderline dispute with it, opened accession negotiations with the EU and became NATO member-state (2017) – not succumbing to the pressure from Serbia and Russia. All the way through it was Milo Đukanović who acted as its promoter and protector of its set course.

been – with a new, European and pro-Western one,” notes commentator Jasmina Lukač.²³

Đukanović’s triumph in presidential elections (2018) and his party coming out victorious at several ensuing local elections, including in Podgorica, put a seal the state policy and the country’s geostrategic orientation.²⁴ Or, as newly elected Montenegrin President Đukanović put it, put an end to “the attempt at destabilization that started back during parliamentary elections in 2016.”²⁵ Montenegro’s breakthroughs are encouraging exceptions in the region.²⁶

At the beginning, when the Serbian Progressive Party /SNS/ came to power in 2012 relations between the two countries were quite fair at official level (especially personal relations between Vučić and Đukanović, according to connoisseurs) and marked by political correctness. However, as of autumn 2016 bilateral relations have been “on ice.” Citizens of Serbia (retired head of the Gendarmerie Bratislav Dikić now standing trial in Podgorica) and Russia (Eduard Sishmakov and Vladimir Popov who have fled to Moscow via Belgrade) were marked as organizers of the attempted coup d’état at the time of Montenegro’s parliamentary elections in October 2016.²⁷ Besides, Serbia refused to extradite several accomplices Podgorica was looking for. Last but not least, former high official of DPS

23 Danas, May 22, 2018.

24 As it turned out, Montenegrin opposition is not up to present-day challenges, especially incapable to undermine the ruling party and its leader. According to some analysts, apart from being pro-Serbian (pro-Russian) most opposition parties have nothing else on their political agenda, which actually marginalize them.

25 Danas, May 21, 2018.

26 This is the more so true given that the border between Montenegro and Kosovo was finally confirmed in early 2018, an act opposition factors in Prishtina have been sabotaging for long.

27 High intelligence officer Nikolay Petrushev was in Belgrade at the time, and took his two compatriots back to Moscow. .

Svetozar Marović and his son, sentenced for misconduct and other crimes, found safe haven in Belgrade.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Major challenges are facing Montenegro in the set of necessary reforms it has to make; and these challenges are not just about “some centers of power” that are trying to slow it down. Montenegro will be undergoing ordeal while implementing these reforms, especially in the judiciary as provided under chapters 23 and 24. For the time being everything is moving at a snail’s pace. The situation in the media and, generally, freedom of expression, brims with controversies. Namely, pro-Serbian and pro-Russian currents control several media outlets in Montenegro; their editorial policy focused on criticizing Milo Đukanović actually makes them a part of the anti-European club.²⁸ Problems of organized crime and corruption also plague Montenegro.

In the long run, Montenegro will also have to cope with transition of power. Up to now, the Democratic Party of Socialists with Milo Đukanović at its helm for two decades has not raised a new generation of politicians capable of coping with social complexity at home, regional turbulences and geostrategic challenges in the same way as its predecessors.

28 International players expressed concern over deposal of Director of RTV of Montenegro Adrijana Kadija (like in the case of wounded reporter Olivera Lakić); “How come that the Public Broadcasting Service of Montenegro keeps the Montenegrin society in mud, in a limbo, nowhere, in that empty space referred to in the dialogue on Kosovo ‘a frozen conflict’ through provincial marginalization of value-based policies,” writes columnist Nikola Samardžić.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Belgrade is very reserved about and expressively distances itself from the dynamics that is now marking Macedonia and Montenegro.

The fact that Skopje and Podgorica are not at Belgrade's priority list in foreign policy is contrary to reason. But they are not given that Belgrade is still after undermining ex-Yugoslav republics.

The international community in the West crucially contributed to ongoing developments in South Balkans by helping Macedonia to solve domestic crisis and reach an agreement on its name with Greece. It also promptly reacted by admitting Montenegro to the membership of NATO.

The EU should continue responding constructively and without undue delay to all good impulses in the region. Brussels' decision to schedule the beginning of accession negotiations with Macedonia for as late as June 2019 is barely encouraging. Regardless of its present inner crises, the EU should reform itself at several tracks and, in parallel, think well about how to solve the future of the Western Balkans.