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Isolation and Multi-Vector Foreign Policy in Post-Lisbon Europe: The Self-Imposed Dilemma of a Small Nation?

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Abstract

For the countries on the continent, the EU constitutes the most important foreign policy context. The non-military character of the organization and the soft power of its political and economic stability are highly attractive for small entities. Through institutional integration they are able to avoid marginalization in international affairs at the same time as preserving their national identities. Once inside, small member-countries are more easily able to exert influence beyond their borders than by staying out and performing individually.

There is no dilemma that the foreign policy of the Republic of Macedonia should be to strive for full-fledged membership of the EU in order to compensate for its substantial 'traditional deficit' of power. However, in the last two years some tendencies in the foreign policy of the country have deviated from the traditional patterns of the so-called double integration agenda (EU and NATO). The ultimate aim of this paper is to expose the structural weaknesses of multi-vector foreign policy when applied by countries with the size and capacities of the Republic of Macedonia.

Keywords*: isolation, multi-vector foreign policy, post-Lisbon Europe, marginalization.*

Introduction

For the countries on the continent, the European Union constitutes the most important foreign policy context. The non-military character of the organization and its soft power of political and economic stability are highly attractive to small states. Through institutional integration they are able to avoid marginalization in international affairs while at the same time preserving their national identities. Once inside, small member-countries are more easily able to exert influence beyond their borders than by staying out and performing individually (Wivel, 2005).

There is no dilemma that the foreign policy of the Republic of Macedonia should be to strive for full-fledged membership in the EU in order to compensate for its 'traditional' deficit of power (a term used in Laurent, 2000). In the last two years, however, some tendencies in the foreign policy of the country have deviated from the traditional patterns of the so-called 'double integration agenda' (EU and NATO). Concepts of political neutrality in a globalized world, or multi-vector foreign policy, possess apparent structural weaknesses when applied by countries with the size and capacities of the Republic of Macedonia. Additionally, the foreign policy of a multiethnic country over-dominated by ethnic components is a fundamental challenge for its existence.

More than 70 years ago, Mitrany wrote that the Balkans lack a natural center (Mitrany, 1936). Regardless of this being historically incorrect, many in the Republic of Macedonia still believe the thesis that those with an upper hand over the country hold the key to the Balkans (Mitrany, 1936). Traditional strategists routinely overstate regional threats and undervalue internal contradictions. However, contrary to the general point of departure of many domestic analysts, the reality is that this land-locked country, economically poor and cut off from the major continental corridors, has marginal geo-strategic relevance.

Overview of Foreign Policy: Past and Present

Spanning over the last six and a half decades, two ideological systems and the same number of states, the foreign policy of the Republic of Macedonia has passed through four stages:

I. Building national identity under communism (1944–1991)

II. Establishing international visibility and perpetual nation-building (1991–2001)

III. Post- conflict consolidation and ensuing Europeanization of foreign policy (2001-2008)

IV. Frozen Euro-Atlantic integrations (2008–present)

The following sections provide brief outlines of the basic foreign policy deliberations in all of the abovementioned historical periods.

I. Building National Identity under Communism (1944–1991)

In regards to its past, Macedonia is not a typical transitional country (Diamond, 2002) since it has experienced a twofold legacy related to its communist and Yugoslav heritage.

The formal inauguration of the state was executed in 1944 by the then communist elite and it endured for 45 years within federal Yugoslavia. Despite the notorious truth that the former state was a totalitarian entity ruled by an autocrat, the very fact that the Macedonian nation was recognized and nominally had a say in the federal organs had a significant emotional impact on the rising national elite and members of the majority ethnic community. Even today, most Macedonian citizens would agree that communism was better due to greater social harmony and stability and a greater sense of security—with the component advantage for ethnic Macedonians that they gained their state. The last fact substantially contributed to the sense that communism was never on the wrong side of history. Therefore it is extremely difficult to name a single political dissident who was purged from office or sentenced to jail for advocating an alternative political ideology.

The greatest challenge to the fate of the federal state was posed by centrifugal, nationalistic forces in the early 1970s when arguably the most radical decentralization in the communist part of the continent was undertaken. The Yugoslav Constitution of 1974 transferred a substantial number of competences to the federal units and declared the sovereign republics de jure and de facto states within the state. However, contrary to the expectations of some local political elites, the federal state remained undisputed in the areas of security and foreign policy. Federal units, including the then Socialist Republic of Macedonia, were formally prevented from assuming an autonomous role in foreign policy (Constitution of the SFRY, 1974). In the southernmost republic, this outcome was accepted peacefully. One of the latecomers in the nation-building process, and economically underdeveloped, the Republic was always a silent participant in the Yugoslav project.

II. Establishing International Visibility: Perpetual Nation-Building (1991-2001)

A second stage followed the national referendum on independence held on September 8, 1991. The referendum passed the legal thresholds and was formally successful. However, the ethnic Albanians had boycotted the voting and a few months later organized a separate referendum on territorial and political autonomy. In the period of formalized statehood, the ideology of Marxism was officially replaced by the template of political pluralism and market economy. In this period on the continent, the post-communist debate focused around the common theme of 'returning to Europe'. Macedonia had formally followed, even though in the past it had never been there.

The internal security deficit and volatile regional surroundings had forced the newly emerged state to emulate all the others from the post-communist blocs. The Macedonian political elite propagated by inertia a double integrative agenda (membership in EU and NATO) and applied for NATO membership in 1993.

Internally, processes of nation-building had been in full swing as a mere continuation from communism. An apt term to describe the state of affairs in the 1990s is that of Brubaker's 'nationalizing statehood' (1996). Ethnic Macedonians were in charge of all layers of the power structure, even the least important institutions. However, the dominant line of reasoning in building the new Republic was seriously challenged on several occasions both internally and externally. At home, ethnic Albanians disputed the entrenched power-sharing mechanisms by organizing a referendum on political autonomy and the introduction of a parallel educational system. Inter-ethnic security incidents occurred frequently, with several fatalities as a consequence.

The strongest external resistance came from Athens, which had been frustrated by the new neighbor who allegedly borrowed elements of the Greek national myth. On two occasions Macedonia was subject to unilateral trade embargoes and, under heavy diplomatic pressure, changed the national flag and several articles in its Constitution. As a result, the internal political and security situation was unstable, which effectively prevented the leadership from forging a coherent foreign policy.

During the whole period, the official foreign policy doctrine was dubbed 'equidistance' and was based upon concern about irredentist claims towards

Macedonian territory allegedly coming from its neighbors. Macedonian elites anticipated dangers coming from four sides, which never happened because the real enemies from the past did not survive communism. In essence, it was an ineffective and defensive approach, far from effective for a small country. The imperative of conducting a pro-active foreign policy was laid aside. State leadership simply waited for American diplomacy to guarantee the survival of the state.

When, at the threshold of the new millennium, the European Union imposed upon potential aspirants the so-called 'regional clause' (Commission of the EC, 2002), all regional leaders, including Macedonia's, were caught off guard. They had reluctantly accepted only a type of cold war neighborhood policy intended to deter and balance regional powers, not to build functional alliances.

III. Post-conflict Consolidation and the Ensuing Europeanization of Foreign Policy (2001–2008)

The fundamental challenge to the state emerged in 2001 from ethnic Albanian insurgents. During the course of the conflict, in spite of its multiethnic composition, the ethnic Macedonian part of the Government virtually hijacked its overall policy direction and continually pursued an ethnic foreign policy. Two examples were frequently cited: the Government formed an ethnically pure para-police unit, the 'Lions', and the Prime Minister called for declaring an emergency situation throughout the entire territory and the mobilization of the security forces of all ethnic Macedonians. Within the group of relevant decision-makers at the time, the lone advocate for a multiethnic foreign policy was the President of the country, Boris Trajkovski. Fully supported by the international community, he masterminded the overall process of negotiations between the warring factions which finally brought forward the Framework Agreement (2001).

The Agreement was the best possible answer from the leadership to the given political, security, regional and historical context. The compelling proof is that, ever since, even its harshest critics have not been able to offer a rational and viable alternative to its core logic. Its plausibility was underlined by the favorable vote of two-thirds of the ethnic Albanian members of Parliament. Such support from the largest minority to the fundamental documents of the state had been given for the first time since independence.

The document was sealed as a bi-ethnic compromise through power-sharing mechanisms to have a stake in the common future. In the crucial domains it had ruled out crafting a mono-ethnic internal and foreign policy in the institutions of the state.

Macedonia's application for EU membership, submitted just 30 months after the conflict, came as a surprise to the bureaucracy in Brussels. However, for the country it arrived in the strategically important interregnum. Crucial application arguments at the time still hold a strong rationale. First, it served to strengthen internal cohesion because EU membership was supported by an ample majority of all ethnic communities. Second, it underlined an equation that without approaching the EU reformers would be marginalized— and vice versa. Third, the application sent signals to the business community that Macedonia was not on the chart of weak states. And last but not least, accession to the EU structural funds would support domestic efforts to revive the stagnant economy.

The overarching goal was to transform Macedonia from a regional bone of contention to a regional role-model. By setting the political and constitutional background for functional multiethnic democracy, the Framework Agreement serves as a kind of specific soft power. Since then, all representatives of the international community have insisted that the Macedonian road to Brussels should go by Ohrid. In December 2005, the status of EU candidate country was granted to Macedonia solely on account of its successful management of interethnic relations (BBC, 2005).

IV. Frozen Euro-Atlantic Integrations (2008–the Present)

In the last ten years, only one political issue has regularly maintained broad support across ethnic lines. A decade-long twining strategy to join NATO and EU has enjoyed the consistent support of 80%–90% the population, with a short break in 2001 when ethnic Macedonians distrusted NATO, believing more in international conspiracies against the state. Although an intriguing question is whether this level of unprecedented support is fully productive for the efforts of pro-westerners, the nucleus of euro-Atlantic endeavor came ever closer to the people's perceptions.

Nonetheless, the Macedonian bid for membership during the NATO Summit in April 2008 in Bucharest was turned down with the consensus of all member-states. The Republic of Greece instigated a blockade and most of

the allies followed out of solidarity. The Summit Declaration was unique in this regard. It recognized that the candidate country had met all of the required criteria but had been denied membership since its constitutional name, the Republic of Macedonia, was disputed by its southern neighbor and longstanding member of NATO, Greece (Summit Declaration, 2008). The same message, couched in slightly different rhetoric, was sent by the European Council in December 2009 when the Macedonian rapprochement towards the EU was effectively halted (Balkan Insight, 2009).

Domestically in this period, instead of state and institution-building, Macedonia went back to nation-building on an ethnically exclusive basis. The main carrier of the re-nationalization processes was the ruling party, despite the presence of two different ethnic Albanian partners in the Government. Nowadays the key national dilemma is: what might be the best and the worst case scenarios for the future of the country if prospects for Euro-Atlantic membership are not visible in the long run? Closing the distance with the EU and NATO requires money and political will. The financial resources of the country are extremely limited. Being indefinitely forgotten in the waiting-room of the EU and NATO will cause the enthusiasm of the political elite to depart as well. And most importantly, Macedonia has always been subject to soft foreign mediation. Virtually all historical milestones since independence have been fixed with external support.

Strategic Depth vs. Political Retreat

For a small and landlocked country, expanding strategic depth is beyond reach without outside leverage. Two viable options are integration within wider institutional networks and active diplomatic presence in the surrounding areas. Contrary to this conventional wisdom, in the last two years the Republic of Macedonia finds itself at the epicenter of triple confusion.

The usefulness of the concept of political neutrality in the globalized world is far from certain (Harden, 1994). In the last two decades, even states once held up as models of neutrality (Austria, Switzerland) have frequently gone beyond the traditional parameters of neutrality. The realistic assumption is that political neutrality is not a workable solution for the small states of the size and capacities similar to Macedonia's.

The central confusion of the Government concerns the autonomous capacity of the country to prosper. The political leadership do not consider the

stalled rapprochement towards the EU and NATO as a profound obstacle for maintaining inter-ethnic relations and economic growth in the medium to the long run. Key decision-makers are informally citing the examples of Norway (a member of NATO but not of the EU), Sweden (in the EU but not in NATO) and formally neutral Switzerland as success stories of stable and prosperous states outside of some dimensions of Euro-Atlantic integration.

The second confusion stems from the groundless perceptions of the elite about the regional profile of the country. For observers, it came as no great surprise that Balkan political elites did not sincerely accept meaningful regional collaboration in the 1990s. The logical explanation for this was to a large extent embedded in the horrible cycle of conflicts when the ultimate priorities of these states were focused on their mere survival. And to a certain extent, this was due to the communist inertia which did not favor regional cooperation unless based upon the same ideological design.

At the dawn of the new millennium, fundamental changes were provoked by two sets of reasons: first, the masterminds of 19th century ideology who activated the Balkan powder-keg were sentenced at The Hague, the regional economies were exhausted, and all the nations no longer willing to support nationalistic political concepts. Second, several countries from the region received clear signals about their prospects of entering NATO and the EU in the short run. All of this confirmed to the people in the most concrete way that Europeanization was stronger than militarization. Thus, the policy of status quo had incrementally begun to be challenged by authentic regional cooperation, within which the people of the region started to emulate Europeans. Within that context, Macedonia was one of the most mobile actors in regional networking.

However, the post-communist process of 'rediscovering the neighbors' proved to be short-lived for Macedonia. The Government in Skopje misunderstood intra-regional engagement to be an essential prerequisite for the wider associations. One recent example is highly illustrative in this regard. Since 2006, the Republic of Macedonia has formally been a member of the Energy Community for South East Europe; de facto, however, Macedonia is completely absent from all regional energy projects. In a country heavily dependent on energy imports, energy security is not envisioned as a component of national security. In terms of energy, the formal candidate-country for EU membership is the most insecure country on the continent today.

In the past three years, the country's 'near abroad', the Western Balkan region, has virtually disappeared from its foreign policy screen. Macedonian leaders are largely ignorant of the valuable foreign policy principle of zero problems with the neighbors. In bilateral relations they have contributed instead to reinvigorating some past historical disputes.

The ultimate confusion concerns the strategic direction in which Macedonia is heading. After the failure in Bucharest and the replay in Brussels, what ensued was an undeclared foreign-policy shift which happened at the most unexpected time. Namely, the Government informally opted for a self-imposed retreat from seeking full-fledged membership in the European Union and NATO. The publicly stated reason was the 'unacceptable high' national price for resolving the name dispute with the Republic of Greece. The other side was blamed not only for imposing pressure to alter the country's name but for allegedly seeking the annihilation of the Macedonian people. What is more, the new multi-vector paradigm was suggested without providing an appropriate explanation.

In general, there are two groups of states with reasons to pursue multi-vector foreign policy. In the first group are big powers (USA, PR China, Russia) with enough resources to spend in realizing their multiple interests throughout the world. The second grouping consists of countries with a specific historical background, geostrategic position or ethnic composition (Israel, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belorussia or Serbia). By some accounts, Macedonia is closer to the second category, but the overwhelming majority of its people, regardless of their ethnicity, are supportive of the Euro-Atlantic direction only.

A fundamental problem with the Macedonian kind of diversified foreign policy would be its very content. This policy is misbalanced at its core. Diversification is workable with complementary elements; otherwise it is impossible to reconcile competitive foreign policy vectors which go against each other. Two recent examples are instructive in this regard. The foremost values of the NATO Alliance stand in sharp opposition to the basic principles of the Non-Aligned Movement. Yet, in April 2009, for the first time since independence, an official representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took part in the Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in Havana, Cuba (A1 television, 2009). And three days before the crucial European Council, which overruled the positive recommendation of the European Commission on opening accession talks, the Macedonian Prime Minister

Stevo Pendarovski: Isolation and Multi-Vector Foreign Policy in Post-Lisbon Europe:
The Self-Imposed Dilemma of a Small Nation?

53

visited Turkey. In Ankara, the Turkish Prime Minister voiced strong support for the Macedonian bid for EU membership and urged Greece to lift its objections to the name 'Republic of Macedonia' (SEtimes, 2009). However, looking for support for EU membership from an EU non-member is far from useful by any measurement.

In a confused move after Bucharest, Macedonia proposed forging strategic partnerships with the USA and Turkey in an attempt to compensate for a foreign policy failure (Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership and Cooperation with the USA, 2008). Were the calculated effects of these foreign-policy steps aimed only at calming the domestic audience and political opposition? Since 1991, the United States of America has continuously been supportive of the newly-born state. At critical junctures in recent Macedonian history, the USA has been the key player behind the scene. They brokered the peace and co-signed the Framework Agreement in August 2001, entered the Adriatic Charter for cooperation in the NATO context two years later, and recognized the constitutional name of the country in 2004.

At the same time, Turkey has been the most persistent regional supporter of Macedonia due to its old historical affiliation with the region and even more because of its long-standing rivalry with Greece on the southern flank of NATO. Turkey immediately recognized the independence of the Republic of Macedonia, signed dozens of military- technical agreements with the Macedonian Army and, until now, was the only member of NATO unwavering in using the constitutional name of the country within the organization.

To conclude, putting aside the structural limits of asymmetric partnerships between big and small countries, in the latest documents with the US and Turkey there is no single strategic element which has not already been present before in the two bilateral contexts.

The country has serious structural problems: an uncompetitive economy, weak institutions and civil society, as well as inter-ethnic problems. The highest priority should be to have multi-vector trade and energy connections, infrastructure corridors and cultural and information highways as trademarks of open societies. Insisting on maintaining many vectors in the foreign policy field is the surest way to losing an important strategic pivot.

Regional Setting and Direct Neighbors

In bilateral cooperation with the central geo-economic player in the region, Greece, the potential has never been fully realized. The Balkans have always been a major focal point of Greek foreign policy. The disintegration of Yugoslavia temporarily interrupted this process and led to tensions with some of its neighbors (Lesser et al, 2001). Later on, Greek investors were preoccupied with buying Macedonia's monopolies where a quick return of money was guaranteed in a then unpredictable business environment. Before and since, relations with Athens have either been in downturn or frozen. The issue which poisoned the atmosphere with the country that has the capacity to penetrate the wider area with business initiatives and euro-Atlantic legitimacy is the one and only matter of Greek objections over the use of the name 'Macedonia'. At present, all diplomatic activity is being dictated by foreign mediators. Apart from meetings within the UN sponsored negotiations, the representatives of the two countries permanently avoid each other.

The regional policy of Serbia today is a long way from its record of the 1990s. Nonetheless, all disputes from that period with Macedonia are still in place: sharp disagreements between the countries' national orthodox churches; the status of cemeteries from the First World War on Macedonian territory; and, in the last two years, completely different views on Kosovo. Macedonia recognized Kosovo as an independent country and established diplomatic relations with Pristina. Serbia immediately responded by declaring the Macedonian ambassador in Belgrade to be persona non grata. Based on an initiative from Belgrade, full diplomatic relations were restored within a period of six months.

In the last several years, Serbia has largely realized its obligations towards the ICTY in The Hague, consolidated its internal political scene and elected consecutive pro-European governments. Barring some highly unexpected outcomes, this country is well poised for a steady approach towards Europe. Until now, Macedonian foreign policy has failed to anticipate that the emerging new Serbia is the most serious contender for assuming the role of regional leader. In political terms we are as distant from our northern neighbor today as we were when Milosevic was in power.

Bulgaria was the first country to recognize the independence of Macedonia—on 15 January 2002. In the following years Sofia made attempts at rapprochement, but the bilateral agenda from the cold-war period re-

emerged. Denying the human rights of Macedonians living in Bulgaria, together with claims on the part of Sofia that the Macedonian nation was 'invented' by communists, severely restricted room for maneuver towards cooperation. The breakthrough occurred in 1999 when the two governments signed a joint Declaration which offered a workable solution to the so-called language dispute. Instead of building upon this achievement, however, what followed was a long period of mutual passivity due to the preferences of both governments to deal with their own internal problems.

For its part, in the last three years the Macedonian Government has almost completely neglected any 'eastern dimension' in its foreign policy. In the same period, bolstered by EU membership, Bulgaria has become more vocal in raising criticisms of various aspects of the foreign policy of its neighbor. The main thesis is that unless certain bilateral disputes are resolved, Macedonia cannot enter the EU. This confrontational approach by Bulgaria is formally hidden behind the phrase 'good-neighborly relations' as part of the Copenhagen criteria. In their view, the most problematic issue is the status of Bulgarians in Macedonia who have allegedly been deprived of some basic political rights. Macedonian foreign policy is not only without good answers to these imposed questions; it seems that the people in charge in Skopje have no ideas as to how to formulate modern responses to this outdated agenda overburdened by history.

It is ironic to perceive an internally vulnerable state unable to ensure its own survival as the greatest exporter of instability, but for many years that was precisely the Macedonian stance on Albania. However, the reality is that, in the last decade, the western neighbor has behaved in an absolutely correct manner, supporting all critical aspects of post-conflict management in Macedonia. Contrary to other neighbors, Albania has a strong potential leverage to use. But the country's half a million Albanians have never been mishandled in order to destabilize the government in Skopje.

The transportation network along the east-west axis (Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania) was the least developed as a result of the former Yugoslavia's emphasis on north-south links with Greece. Virtually nothing has happened in the meantime in this regard. The Albanian economy has one of the fastest growth rates in a region steadily emerging from horrible communist backwardness. Even that has not proved a compelling incentive for Macedonia to use its geographical proximity and its large Albanian community at home to intensify economic cooperation. Obviously the traces

of historical mistrust are still alive. The US in 2003 pressed the two countries into establishing the so-called Adriatic Group of countries, a security quadrangle along with Croatia aimed at bringing all of them under the NATO umbrella. Unfortunately, bilateral interaction within this sensitive security framework has always been mechanical, never sincere.

In recent history, security spillovers to Macedonia from its newest neighbor have been most direct on two occasions: first in 1999 when the country stood on the brink of social explosion, hosting 300,000 refugees from Kosovo; and two years later when logistical support was offered to the guerilla movement in the initial stages of the Macedonian conflict. But a chain of landmark events for regional security happened in the period 2005–2008 when the Contact Group appeared with a comprehensive settlement for the UN protectorate. The group's proposal of November 2005 was absolutely critical for Macedonia as the whole project was aimed at resolving the main issue while avoiding any domino effects in the vicinity. The critical Point Six from the Guiding Principles for the resolution of the final status specified the main aim as strengthening regional security and stability and, to this end, explicitly ruled out the union of Kosovo with any country or part of any country in the region (UNOSEC, 2005). In the future, the only settlement that may reasonably be feared by Skopje is the partition of Kosovo. This would set a dangerous precedent in the decade-long dissolution of the former state, challenging the administrative borders of ex-Yugoslavia.

Macedonia was in the third group of countries to recognize Kosovo's independence, but waited another year before establishing diplomatic relations—until the demarcation of the joint border was completed. Macedonia recognized Kosovo on October 9, 2008, and established diplomatic relations on October 18, 2009. Despite the fact that Macedonia has a huge trade surplus with Kosovo, there are no plans for upgrading an appalling road and rail infrastructure between the two states. The Macedonian embassy in Pristina is understaffed and therefore unable to facilitate trade relations and practical political cooperation. The conclusion is that, even though formal recognition has taken place, Macedonia still treats Kosovo only as a semi-neighbor. This has nothing to do with Kosovo being halfway towards full-fledged membership in international institutions; it has to do with the outdated mentality of the ethnic Macedonian political elite.

Operational forms of effective foreign policy must be positioned in a geographical perspective and connected with the real resources of the

society. In the past three years, Macedonian regional policy has left behind silent diplomacy and started with a model of protest diplomacy (Henrikson, 1999) whose main stance is essentially confrontational. Macedonia has sued Greece at the International Court of Justice and the Government has publicly pledged official legal support for the restitution claims of thousands of refugees from the Greek Civil War (SE Times, 2008).

Basically, the prerequisites for success within this more aggressive diplomatic approach are three: solid arguments, an influential diaspora, and abundant financial resources. Macedonia is in short supply on all three accounts.

'Lost' Lands and the Wider Geopolitical Dynamic

During the post-communist period, in the regional and wider context, realistic foreign priorities and important bilateral partnerships have not been defined. Minuscule financial and human resources have been dissipated because the concept of pivotal states (Chase et al., 1996) and regions is far from being recognized and implemented. Instead of forging functional alliances in a world of supra-territorial jurisdictions and de-territorialized challenges, Macedonian foreign policy has been managed in accordance with the traditional matrix of many post-communist states. In both a formal and practical sense, all diplomatic efforts have looked towards the headquarters of EU and NATO in Brussels. For many years these linear undertakings strongly influenced political perceptions in which there was no place for several important countries and regions in the economic, security and strategic sense.

Macedonia has never even considered penetrating more remote areas. One explanation for this goes back to the nation's past. The mentality and experience of the Non-Alignment Movement were fundamental elements of the former Yugoslavia's national discourse. The core of this type of strategic thinking was that of 'equal suspicion' towards Western and Eastern alliances, seeking a neutral, de facto, immobile position. The broader Middle East, the Black Sea and Caucasus, Central Asia and the Mediterranean are barely known analytical concepts amongst the Macedonian foreign policy community. But, before tackling these issues, the author will briefly comment on the foreign-policy delusions entertained with regard to two countries with undisputed regional and global potential—Russia and Turkey.

The Republic of Macedonia has deliberately encountered conceptual problems in its bilateral relations with the Russian Federation. Judging from official political rhetoric of the past, the former superpower was considered our strategic partner on an equal footing with the USA or the European Union. All of that happened in the period when Russia had serious structural problems, a poor democratic record, and firmly declared opposition to the enlargement of both NATO and the EU. What is needed for the future is a pragmatic approach which should avoid vocabulary about 'traditional' friendship and 'Orthodox' alliances. A relevant foreign policy paradigm should take into consideration only the remaining dimension of Russia's super-power status, i.e. energy (Hill, 2004). Searching for other political alternatives would be wasting precious time.

The greatest omission in bilateral relations with Turkey in the past two decades has been preferring to emphasize cultural bonds and common history over its huge economic potential. A short example will suffice: Macedonia is barely supplied with gas and Turkey is the direct neighbor of countries and regions which possess nearly 72% of the world's proven reserves of gas (Russia, Caucasus, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf and the eastern Mediterranean) and has all the chances in the middle run to become the fourth largest gas- supplying artery for Europe (Roberts, 2004).

As a candidate-country for EU and NATO membership, Macedonia should closely follow the dynamic and logic of integration which is one of getting closer to the Black Sea region. Macedonia does not have a diplomatic or trade mission in the region and its high-level officials are totally ignorant of the countries in the Caucasus, Armenia and Georgia. The country is not a member of the very important economic multilateral regional grouping, the Organization for Black Sea Economic Cooperation. Political correctness towards Russia should not be an argument for inactivity in this strategically important area. Concerning the region, many countries are aiming for its energy resources and economic cooperation, especially with the two most dynamic states in Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan (Wayne, 2005). Last but not least, an important feature of the region is illegal trafficking in persons, weapons and drugs and its potential to export instability towards Europe. The national interest of Macedonia should be to emulate the first two tendencies and avoid the last.

Paradoxically, the most important strategic region in the world, the Middle East, is not mentioned at all in the foreign policy of the country. Except on its

geographical margins (Egypt and Turkey), Macedonia does not have a single diplomatic mission, trade or information bureau in the whole region, except its recent symbolic presence in Qatar. Beyond doubt, Macedonia has a strategic interest in following the course of developments in this region whose borders are only 1,000 kilometers from its own. A high priority must be, either individually or together with other European partners, to take part in infrastructure projects, trade and energy cooperation.

Towards the Mediterranean region, there is the same level of neglect. The region should be observed for at least two important reasons: in terms of its potential for economic and energy cooperation and as a possible source of radical ideologies and security threats. At present, Macedonia has no formal diplomatic presence in the southern Mediterranean zone (Morocco, Algeria and Libya).

Inter-Ethnic Infusions in National Foreign Policy

Since independence, ethnic Albanians as the biggest minority in the country have been the key factor in maintaining the country's internal balance. In 2001, internal geopolitics (Gyula, 2002) came into play due to competing ethno-strategies over the same territory and resources. These tendencies have since significantly lost their appeal, but the achieved level of stability is not irreversible. Therefore, future challenges are far more tied to the dynamic of inter-ethnic relations than to the possible regional spillover.

For years, analysts have routinely predicted separation between Macedonians and Albanians along ethnic lines because of long-standing confrontational views on the constitutional composition of the country. Until recently, it was inconceivable that the main line of division would emerge with regard to the timetable for Euro-Atlantic integration. Recently, a high official of the ethnic Albanian party in power stated that, unless the name dispute with Greece is resolved, the Albanian community will enter NATO and EU 'without ethnic Macedonians' (A1 Television, 2009). This only confirmed the reality that the ongoing problem with Greece does not have the same level of impact for the two biggest ethnic communities.

The background to the splitting perceptions is connected with the rather unique inner 'substance' of the country. In an era of still vibrant nation states, a political nation has never existed in Macedonia and there is a high probability that it never will. People do not have common national myths and

the same historical heroes. The loyalty of citizens to the constitutional emblems of the state—the national anthem and the flag—is dependent on their ethnicity. In such an environment, nation building is not possible, while two-tier state- building is hardly feasible. A unified strategic culture does not exist in Macedonia as Macedonians and Albanians differ over almost all the vital elements of such a strategy (Gray, 1995). They live in the same country but they view the distant and the recent past differently and disagree as to the future.

From 1991, the political elite tried and failed to build a strategic culture on the basis of a confused blend of communist legacy and tradition and the values and beliefs of the majority. After the conflict in 2001, it was widely expected that the Framework Agreement might signal the introduction of a new philosophy. Nine years later, the end result at national level is a fragmented strategic culture. This has strong inhibiting effects on decision-makers whenever they try to formulate coherent national strategies.

In order to gain nation-wide legitimacy, foreign policy must reflect all major constituencies in the country. If the interests of a large part of the population are not incorporated in major foreign policy decisions, the result is an 'ethnic' foreign policy disputed by other ethnic communities in the country. Today, Macedonians and Albanians have different foreign policy priorities and conflicting strategic preferences. A recent poll confirmed the trends that the overwhelming majority of ethnic Macedonians are against membership in NATO if the precondition is to change the country's name (Kanal 5 Television, 2010).

The reality is that the incentives for Macedonian multi-vector foreign policy arise from internal sources.

Conclusions

The country does not need a new foreign policy vision since the old one has been far from realized. The viability of the state will depend upon the capabilities of its political elites to anchor it in the Euro-Atlantic family of nations. To the surprise of many in the Republic of Macedonia, key foreign-policy debates are not yet over. Liberal, internationalist forward- looking visions and narrow, nationalistic and inward-looking viewpoints are lining up against each other.

It seems that the longstanding Euro-Atlantic policy is losing ground. Four years after being granted the status of a candidate country, Macedonia still has a problem internalizing the integration agenda since the EU and NATO are treated as externalities. Foreign policy issues in the past eight years have not had a significant influence on election outcomes. In the same period, the authority of the so-called 'international community' has been greatly diminished. The current political elite of the country is perfectly aware of both of these facts.

However, what national leaders should grasp is that small states have a significantly smaller margin of error in international affairs than bigger states (Handel in Maas, 2007). Concepts of 'grand' foreign policy designs with historic proportions should remain outside the perimeter of their strategic thinking. If not, inadequate policy choices may well affect the future of their country.

Endnotes

[1] Bulgaria considers the Macedonian language to be a regional dialect of Bulgarian, while Macedonians rightly insist that their language is the cornerstone of their distinct ethnic identity.

[2] In 2001, the Constitutional Court proclaimed illegal an NGO which aimed to propagate the Bulgarian cause in Macedonia.

[3] The annual budget of the Foreign Ministry for 2010 was 48 million Euros. The Ministry has approximately 400 employees.

[4] The EU included the countries from this region in its Neighborhood Policy, while NATO is enhancing this regional dimension within its Partnership for Peace program.

[5] Macedonian sent an ambassador to Qatar for the first time in 2009.

[6] Although it is a Mediterranean country, Turkey is not analyzed in this part of the paper.

[7] On many occasions, Macedonia has been cited as a success story for having avoided civil war and for having come a long way to the very threshold of Europe.

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