

Internationalism, Regionalism or seclusion – Rethinking North Macedonia's future prospects

Research Article

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Abstract

The demise of the century of conflicts – the XX th century, does not seem to be altogether true for countries in the Balkan. Aside from its being “interesting times” in terms of the turbulences and unsteady developments, it has also been the century of much bloodshed, conflicts and clashes. Even though there was much hope and high expectation for progress, yet, neither the XXI st century has brought much change, and the Balkans seems to be trapped in limbo with projections of conflict on one end and stability on the other. Aside from this contestation milieu, there are also other pending concerns, such as the democratic consolidation of the region, ending of autocratic governance, achieving stability and security and advancing towards EU and NATO integration. The foreign policy towards the Balkan region has been articulated and dimensioned according to that perception and over the past decades it included various forms of intervention. These externalities have resulted to the creation of a new discourse named stabilitocracy. So, instead of dealing with the progress of the region, the focus is on the security and stability within the region and the states, themselves. Putting the stability and security on the top of the agenda, instead of dealing with region's democratic advancement is problematic per se, but then again, the real concern derives from the outlook on the general progress of the region vis –a- vis the future predictions or its status some decades ago. The prospect of joining the EU and NATO is still on the top of the political agenda of the Balkan states so the EU must keep the perspective alive. The Macedonian future prospects have been predetermined by its past, its success and its failures. If the ending of Macedonian conundrum is dependent upon it making a choice among the three most viable perspectives, as mentioned before, then the internationalization is unmatched. Regionalism may engage the continuation the status quo or perpetuate further disputes and even conflicts, and it is an option that has passed the trial and error test. Isolation cannot secure any prospect of the country, except seclusion. One particular message recently conveyed by the French Ambassador in Macedonia, Mr. Thimonier that “the choice is between North Macedonia and North Korea”, can be experienced as a rough approximation or straightforward assessment of current prospects, since the recent developments regarding the name dispute are to be considered as instrumental in securing the EU and NATO perspective of Macedonia and its internationalism.

Keywords: Internationalism, regionalism, isolation, Macedonia, Western Balkan, EU integration.

1. Introduction

The demise of the century of conflicts – the XX th century, does not seem to be altogether true for countries in the Balkan. Aside from its being “interesting times” in terms of the turbulences and unsteady developments, it has also been the century of much bloodshed, conflicts and clashes. Even though there was much hope and high expectation for progress, yet, neither the XXI st century has brought much change, and the Balkans seems to be trapped in limbo with projections of conflict on one end and stability on the other. The vast number of existing bilateral disputes are rooted in the geopolitics and history of the Balkans region and encompass an extensive array of issues¹: border and territorial disputes (concerning delineation and demarcation of borders and recognition of sovereign states within those territories), disputes

¹ Djolai M.and Nechev Z., 2018. Bilateral Disputes Conundrum: Accepting the Past and Finding Solutions for the Western Balkans, BIEPAG, Policy Brief, p. 6.

pertaining rights of national minorities (with a broad scope that includes property issues, identity, status and representation), and the status of refugees and IDPs from the neighboring countries². And while most of them are intrinsically connected, visible and enduring, as the countries of the Balkan approach the EU accession, a serious amount of additional issues may cause the opening of another set of bilateral disputes³.

Notwithstanding this contestation milieu, there are also other pending concerns, such as the democratic consolidation of the region, ending of autocratic governance, achieving stability and security and advancing towards EU and NATO integration. All of them are distinct and relatively unconnected issues if we were discussing it globally, yet in the Balkan countries they are tightly coupled and mutually enhanced. In fact, due to the extended transition, inability to establish political democracy, perpetual failure to reconcile issues on the state-ethnicity-religion triad and enduring conundrum of EU and NATO enlargement, have created a perception that the Balkan is a secluded pocket of instability and insecurity in Europe. The foreign policy towards the Balkan region has been articulated and dimensioned according to that perception and over the past decades it included various forms of intervention. These externalities have resulted to the creation of a new discourse named stabilocracy⁴. So, instead of dealing with the progress of the region, the focus is on the security and stability within the region and the states, themselves. Putting the stability and security on the top of the agenda, instead of dealing with region's democratic advancement is problematic per se, but then again, the real concern derives from the outlook on the general progress of the region vis –a- vis the future predictions or its status some decades ago.

Macedonia's prospects, in this manner, should not be regarded as dissimilar with any other Balkan country that has not yet managed to ally itself within the EU and NATO. All of the named attributes, along with the common features of new democracies shared by all societies across the region (such as the non-functional state, the erosion of the rule of law, rising xenophobia and pervasive economic insecurity⁵) create a specific set of mutualities⁶ which are embedded in political identities of the Balkan. In the Macedonian case there are country specifics and adverse matters related to the resolving of the name dispute, ending of political polarity based on competing projects on national identity and ensuring an inclusive society. This is, without a doubt, a formidable list of problems that raise an equally arduous list of questions, and its answers are not easily found. The article aims at setting the contours on future developments on Macedonia's path, bearing in mind these three most daring issues and anticipating viable outcomes: internationalism, regionalism and seclusion.

² Ibidem, p. 6.

³ Ibidem, p. 7.

⁴ Pavlović S. 2016. Montenegro's 'stabilocracy': The West's support of Đukanović is damaging the prospects of democratic change, available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/12/23/montenegros-stabilocracy-how-the-wests-support-of-đukanovic-is-damaging-the-prospects-of-democratic-change/>, also see The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. Authoritarianism and EU Stabilocracy, Policy Paper, March 2017

⁵ Prelec M. 2017. New Balkan Turbulence Challenges Europe, International Crisis Group, Online commentary, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/balkans/macedonia/new-balkan-turbulence-challenges-europe>

⁶ The psychoanalytical school of development, namely Erickson, noted that our identities are defined by the "3 C"'s -resources of identity making: our competences, our communities and our commitments, jointly named as mutualities. Hoover, K, and Erickson, L. K. 2004. Introduction: The future of identity. In K. Hoover (Ed.), The future of identity: Centennial reflections on the legacy of Erik Erikson (pp. 1-14). Lanham: Lexington Books.

2. The North Macedonian context

Over the past decade, Macedonia became a poster country for state capture⁷ undergoing classic capture control mechanisms⁸ – weak and powerless political opposition, silenced and financially dependent media and civil society and uncritical citizenry. Related to the last mechanism, much can be argued on citizen's integrity, party politics and electoral system, yet the real drawback is the political culture. Again, in this context Macedonia does not differ much from other Balkan societies. Miosia-Lisjak argues, that, what is most striking is that all over the region the voters opted for powerful, charismatic leaders with strong political instincts who successfully build their image as “benefactors”⁹. The latter is related to the one of the most important features of an approximated average of Balkan's political culture - the deep-seated preference for a strong leader so the people tend to seek the savior, the one and only. This authoritarian understanding of politics results in a parochial, patriarchal and in some cases even subjective political culture as a reminiscence of the past. As most of the Balkan countries have experienced socialism, the legacy of this particular type of political culture¹⁰ along with the practicing of politics which was reserved for selected few (elite based activity) and limited for the wider population has created a setting that is region specific and democratically implausible. Additionally, the democratic age brought upon the idea that politics is open to everyone so generations of people that were starving for political action, make every effort to satisfy this hunger. Nevertheless, a typical Balkan society does not tend to empower the institutions but places a sweeping confidence in the subjective nature of political leadership. And since, institutions of any age inevitably reflect the character of those charged with managing them¹¹, all across the region, there are weak institutions and strong political leaders. The transition towards political democracy requires altered political culture, attitudes and behavior of the citizens to complement the functioning of its political system¹² and its roots are set by the social transformation that encompasses a crossing over from an one to another system¹³. The latter is conditioned by many stipulations such as: introduction of a diverse economic structure, novel rationality and engaged public. Yet, the primary agents of social change (such as the urban intelligentsia, young, well educated professionals) are being weakened by emigration. And a typical Balkan country has high rate of emigration, which is dauntingly related to the country's delayed EU accession. The state capture was similar in all countries of the Balkan region, although as far as Macedonia is concerned two important (and cumulative) matters conditioned it- the name issue and the

⁷ A comprehensive outlook on the state capture in the Balkans and Macedonia, in particular, is offered by range of texts Dvornik S. (ed.), 2017. *Experience with Captured States*, Heinrich Böll Stiftung.

⁸ Miosia-Lisjak N., 2017. *Local Captured State-An Empirical View*, in Dvornik S. (ed.), *Experience with Captured States*, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, p.58.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ In socialism, the prevalence of subjective political culture ensures that people will have awareness about the government, the political institutions and the political actors and they will accept their decisions without much possibility for dissent. See more in Mangova I. and Popovikj M. 2015. *Civic and Political Activism in Western Balkan Societies*, in *Lost in Transition-Social Transformations in South-East Europe*, Ed. by Cvetičanin P, Mangova I. and Markovikj, N. Skopje, pp. 97-117.

¹¹ Interview with Madeleine Albright, “On Tyranny, populism and how best to respond today”, *The Economist* online edition, 30 July 2018, <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/07/30/on-tyranny-populism-and-how-best-to-respond-today>

¹² Mangova I. and Popovikj M., *op cit.* p. 98.

¹³ Rajchinovska Pandeva I. *Transition in the Balkans – Struggles of Homo Balkanicus and Homo Politicus*, in *Lost in Transition-Social Transformations in South-East Europe*, Ed. by Cvetičanin P, Mangova I. and Markovikj, N. Skopje, pp. 265-276.

stalled EU and NATO integration of the country¹⁴. And even though both are related to foreign policy, they are in fact deeply rooted in internal policies due to the inevitable association to identity politics. As Hintz argued, identities are deeply important for understanding foreign policy and there is a complex link between national identity contestation and foreign policy, since the former is not a phenomenon bounded with the domestic arena and both shapes and is shaped by foreign policy gambits¹⁵. Regarding the regional perspective, the typical Balkan country has a patchwork foreign policy and its inception depends upon numerous shifts of national determinants but also due to delayed allegiance with the West. In the Macedonian context, the foremost external and internal issue is the name-dispute. Because of the name dispute, the Republic of Macedonia was recognized as FYROM –Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and compelled to engage in name negotiations that lasted for 27 years. Although many perceive the Greek Macedonian dispute via the name issue, the origin goes back to the greater discourse on the Macedonian question which is to be considered as a battle of (national) narratives, and the name as a mere symbol. This century old clash involves other parties as well, most notably Bulgaria. Much of its frame has been based on its qualitative dimension or the distinction of “us” vs. the “other” and developed a setting in which the sides took upon entrenched positions. The name dispute became internationalized due to the delay of EU and NATO accession which were conditioned by the resolving of the dispute along with the fulfilment of conditions (political and economic criteria). Aside from the internationalization of the name dispute there are also serious implications regarding the foreign policies of both countries on bilateral level. The bilateral relations have been historically determined and deeply rooted, dependent upon psychological perceptions and social factors affecting populations in both countries, all of which compose a set of frustrations that can be attributed to “unresolved histories¹⁶” of the Balkan or the failure to achieve historic accommodation of national narratives. Due to several reasons (the stalled NATO and EU accession, the rise of authoritarian rule by Gruevski, the antiquisation project, the dynamic of internal politics in Greece and Macedonia) over the past decade, the name issue became closely related to the idea of reconstructing the Macedonian national identity. Since 2017, the Macedonian government undertook a process of reconciliation with its imminent neighbor countries, Bulgaria and Greece. The recently signed Prespa agreement between Macedonia and Greece, along with the Good Neighborly Relations Agreement between Bulgaria and Macedonia, were aimed at closing the Macedonian question in foreign policy arena but also at securing an inclusive and fixed/uncontested national identity for internal purposes. So the anticipation of resolving the name dispute is related to the reconciliation of opposing projects of nation-building, as well as to the “fixing” of identity in the domestic arena. Furthermore, both agreements are to create foundations for cooperation (even strategic cooperation, as in Prespa agreement) and enhance the NATO and EU integration of the country. The stipulations of the Prespa agreement envisage an all-encompassing use of the

¹⁴ A valuable interpretation on the actual causes that triggered the state capture is offered by, Bliznakovski, who claims that the blockade that Macedonia experienced in its EU and NATO integration has directly contributed to the development of the myths of victimization that VMRO-DPMNE skillfully used to prevent alteration of power. See more in Bliznakovski J. 2017. When State Capture and Myths of Victimization Meet-The Story of a Party’s Attempt to Prevent Democratic Alteration of Power, in Srgan Dvornik (ed.), Experience with Captured States, Heinrich Böll Stiftung. The argument that the Macedonian state capture is an undesired consequence of the enduring political and institutional crisis is purposed by Braun and Nemeth in Braun A. and Nemeth F. 2016. The Captured State: Political and Institutional Crisis in Macedonia, International Relations Quarterly, Vol.7, No.4.

¹⁵ Hintz L. 2015.” Take it outside!” National identity contestation in the foreign policy arena”, European Journal of International Relations, pp. 1-27

¹⁶ Kojouharov A. 2004. Bulgarian ‘Macedonian’ Nationalism: A Conceptual Overview, OJPCR: The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution, 6.1 Fall: 282-295, p. 282.

changed constitutional name/an erga omnes use of the new name – Republic of North Macedonia, which was agreed upon in the last course of the name negotiations. The later has yet to be implemented by set of measures implemented in Macedonia and Greece, and its progress has been challenged in both countries, equally. The Agreement is principally acknowledged and supported by the international community and dared and rejected by diverse parties in Greece and Macedonia. Nevertheless, it was a step anticipated for the closure of historic confrontations and dauntingly related to the Macedonian progress.

In the past few decades, Macedonia has worked on creating a close and strategic relationship with the West. The association with the Western countries (USA, France, Germany, Great Britain and so forth) overlapped with the aspiration to become part of the EU and NATO integrations but also as result of the geopolitical setting of the region. As a relatively weak regional power with enhanced geostrategic position on the crossroads of corridors 8 and 10, Macedonia stands in a unique position and is, in a way, conditioned to secure international cooperation. As Zarif argues, today the world is moving towards a state of mutual interdependence and most nation states, regardless of their size, power, influence or other attributes have come to realize that isolationism whether voluntary or imposed, is neither a virtue nor an advantage¹⁷. The alliance with the West is not however, unchallenged. There are other world and regional powers that try to mitigate this relation, still, with none or minuscule effect. For example, the much discussed Russian attempt to influence the regional political arena on foreign policy orientations, because of many reasons has suffered defeat so it manifested as opportunistic, disordered and ultimately of little impact and consequence. On the other hand, the ongoing debate on the Prespa agreement has placed forward and even underlined the perspective of EU and NATO integration since Macedonia received an invitation to join NATO and secured the opening of the screening process for EU accession.

Delayed accession into EU and NATO is a twofaced predicament - expectations for membership vs. denial to grant accession and both of them have subjective and objective interpretations. Research shows that in a typical Balkan country, public opinion broadly supports integration into NATO and EU¹⁸ and commonly foresees it as the final step of transition. Furthermore, this notion is usually associated with resolution of some conflict or crisis and the advancement of economies. The issue has been exploited far and long by many political elites and even labeled as the West's latest sin¹⁹. The political calculations in these sense worked out well for authoritarian leadership all across the region but also made sure that any sign of real reform is diminished and undermined. On the opposite side of the scale are the appeals for more dedicated and resolute approach on EU's behalf in the Western Balkan region and fulfillment of the promise that it will eventually become part of the integrated bloc.

Beyond the calls for swift integration of the region into the EU, there are also significant other voices such as that expanding the bloc too quickly would be a mistake since the EU membership can be discussed if and when these countries show themselves to be stable democracies based on the rule of law²⁰. The idea to speed up the accession and leverage any future confrontations within the Western Balkan region by it, was swept away some time ago under the conviction that

¹⁷ Javad Zarif M. 2017. What Iran Really wants - Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era, Foreign Policy, available at www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/iran/2014-04-17/what-iran-really-wants

¹⁸ Balkan Barometer 2017, Year 3, Number 3, Regional Cooperation Council, available at https://www.rcc.int/seeds/files/RCC_BalkanBarometer_PublicOpinion_2017.pdf

¹⁹ The original one being the meddling in nation-building and state-building project in the Balkans.

²⁰ Arbutina Z. 2018. Western Balkans joining EU would be wrong move for wrong reasons, DW, available at <http://www.dw.com/en/opinion-western-balkans-joining-eu-would-be-wrong-move-for-wrong-reasons/a-42721362>

cosmetic changes are not acceptable. As Olli Rehn²¹ underlined “the EU must ensure that the countries undertake deep reforms which become irreversibly absorbed into the fabric of public life, not just cosmetic changes when a deadline approaches”. Speeding up the accession for Western Balkan countries, under the pretense of real life reforms cannot substitute what needs to be undertaken, and this is clearly obvious each time the countries undergo the process of integration.

In the latest state of the Union address by Jean Claude Juncker, on the 12th of September 2018, EU/ Europe was described as “guardian of peace”²². Juncker called for patriotism that is used for good, not as a tool against others. He also spoke against nationalism that can lead towards war and underlined that Europe’s duty and perpetual responsibility lies in the idea to protect the continent from another conflict and prevent the possibility of conflict. He spoke of unity (united Europe thru EU) as a force to be reckoned with. According to him, Europe must be an active player, an architect of tomorrow’s world. The main idea was stipulated around his saying that Europe can export stability (based on enlargement efforts but also by achieving reconciliation of Europe’s history and geography). Hence, the most important reference towards the Western Balkan was underlined – “We must find unity when it comes to the Western Balkan, once and for all. Should we not, our immediate neighborhood will be shaped by others”²³. And here is one very important point related to the current geopolitical turmoil in the Western Balkan region. As mentioned before, there are many open disputes and conflicts in the region, out of which three are most potent: Macedonian-Greek name dispute, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Hercegovina. The first one is the most protracted, the second one is the most explosive and the third one is the most complicated one of them all. In such a setting, in this moment, by adapting to the reality, Macedonia has the opportunity to choose, and its choices are: to internationalize itself, to stick within regional conundrum of conflicts and disputes or to isolate itself.

3. Conclusions

Adjusting to the new reality ranks among the principal strategic challenges of Western Balkan countries. The idea of imposing zero-sum games on international stage has lost its luster but there are still some actors that cling to their old habits and habitually pursue their own interest at the expense of others²⁴. In the meanwhile, the EU looks trapped in an authoritarian equilibrium²⁵ and the global state of affairs is not much different since the dark forces of world politics - illiberalism, authoritarianism, nationalism, protectionism, spheres of influence, territorial revisionism have reasserted themselves²⁶. The debate on the future of EU has engaged much of EU’s effort and time, while the state of democracy and freedom in the Balkan countries has been

²¹ Rehn O. 2007. Enlargement as an instrument of the EU’s soft power, Anna Lindh Award Ceremony Speech, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-07-642_en.pdf?locale=en%3E

²² State of the Union Address, 2018. The Hour of European Sovereignty, Authorised version of the State of the Union Address 2018, p. 2, available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-speech_en_0.pdf

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Zarif, op. cit.

²⁵ Kelemen R.D. 2017. Europe’s Authoritarian Equilibrium-Invoking Article 7 Against Poland Won’t Be Enough, Foreign Affairs, available at www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/hungary/2017-12-22/europes-authoritarian-equilibrium

²⁶ Deudney D. and Ikenberry G.J. 2018. The Resilient Order, Foreign Affairs, available at www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-06-14/liberal-world

steadily declining²⁷ so the result has been the rise of a regional “stabilitocracy”- regime of weak democracies and autocratically minded leaders, who govern through informal, patronage networks and claim to provide pro-Western stability in the region²⁸. So in a way, the democratic development of the Balkan societies has been sacrificed for the sake of their stability and tolerated by the EU and many of its members²⁹. These are developments that have to be taken into account when the future or the progress of the Balkan is envisaged along with the following facts: a) the public support for EU and NATO accession is still high all across the region; b) there is no viable alternative to the EU; c) the joining into NATO is largely undisputed and related to the internal stability of the region; d) the region has been, to a large extent, already integrated into the EU, through its citizens, the economic relations with the EU and other ties³⁰.

The prospect of joining the EU and NATO is still on the top of the political agenda of the Balkan states so the EU must keep the perspective alive. Just as Mogherini noted in 2017 - “situation [in the Western Balkans]... is tense, it is exposed to challenges, both internally and regionally, also globally, but it is a region that has in itself the capacity to react to that, provided that the credibility of the European integration process is there.”³¹

The Macedonian future prospects have been predetermined by its past, its success and its failures. If the ending of Macedonian conundrum is dependent upon it making a choice among the three most viable perspectives, as mentioned before, then the internationalization is unmatched. Regionalism may engage the continuation the status quo or perpetuate further disputes and even conflicts, and it is an option that has passed the trial and error test. Isolation cannot secure any prospect of the country, other than seclusion. One particular message recently conveyed by the French Ambassador in Macedonia, Mr. Thimonier that “the choice is between North Macedonia and North Korea³²”, can be experienced as a rough approximation or straightforward assessment of current prospects, since the recent developments regarding the name dispute are to be considered as instrumental in securing the EU and NATO perspective of Macedonia and its internationalism.

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²⁷ The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. Authoritarianism and EU Stabilitocracy, BIEPAG Policy Paper, March 2017. p.11.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 7.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 7.

³⁰ Ibidem, p.10.

³¹ Article of European Western Balkans portal, 2017. Mogherini in Western Balkans: Key Messages, European Western Balkans, available at <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/03/08/mogherini-in-western-balkans-key-messages/>

³² French ambassador to FYROM says ‘choice is between North Macedonia and North Korea’, 22.09.2018, Onilne edition of Ekathimerini, available at <http://www.ekathimerini.com/232865/article/ekathimerini/news/french-ambassador-to-fyrom-says-choice-is-between-north-macedonia-and-north-korea>

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