

## SECURITY CHALLENGES OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA AFTER THE NATO ACCESSION

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### Abstract

The main goal of this paper is to analyze the kinds of security challenges and threats the Republic of North Macedonia is facing after its accession in NATO. This study would be a comparative analysis of two periods, respectively two years before its official accession and the period from its NATO accession until today. The paper is a practical attempt to show and explain to the academic and ordinary society whether North Macedonia has closed certain groups of security threats and security challenges traditional for the Western Balkan region after its membership in NATO, but also the new security challenges and threats which this country is facing since its full membership in NATO. From theoretical point of view, we will try to explain if small states, on the example of North Macedonia, are able to create a national security strategy or its security strategy depends on the so-called great powers and their security goals, similar to the case with foreign policy strategies, according to the findings of the representatives of the theory of realism. Key questions that should be answered in this paper are the following: Has North Macedonia improved its security mosaic since its NATO accession? What are the new security challenges and threats after its membership? Does the creation of the security strategy of North Macedonia depend on its NATO allies?

**Key words:** *security challenges, threats, the Republic of North Macedonia, NATO membership, security strategy*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Republic of North Macedonia started its path to NATO accession at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But, as one of its key foreign policy goals, the strive for NATO membership was established during the nineties, when the first pillars of the independent Macedonian state were established. The authorities of the Republic of Macedonia immediately after proclaiming the independence were aware that the safe sustainability of the country was in a cause-and-effect relationship with the NATO integration. That is why the political structure which was in power during the nineties has insisted that fully NATO membership is an imperative in the foreign policy plan of the Republic of Macedonia, both in short and long terms (Arnaudov, 2021. p.63). On that occasion, on December 23<sup>rd</sup> 1993, the Macedonian Assembly (Меѓународни односи - надворешна политика -

Интеграцијата во евро-атлантските структури е приоритет на Македонија) adopted a unanimous decision on the accession of the Republic of Macedonia to NATO (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, Decision on the accession of the Republic of Macedonia into NATO membership, 1993, p.1867). With this decision, the Republic of Macedonia adopted an official document on its aspirations towards the Euro-Atlantic integration. As it is stated on the official website of the Macedonian Ministry of Defense, the adoption of that document marked the beginning of the country's cooperation with NATO („Патот до НАТО”, Министерство за одбрана, Република Северна Македонија). But this does not mean that the Republic of Macedonia became a full member of the Alliance rapidly, but rather its path to the Atlantic collective security system was filled with numerous challenges, including internal security destabilization and regional disputes as determinants in the process of the Euro-Atlantic integration. In the early 1990s, the essential reasons of the former Macedonian authorities in determining integration into NATO as one of the main foreign policy goals of the country were the civil conflicts on the territory of former Yugoslavia, as well as the potential dangers of conflicts spilling over to the territory of the independent Republic of Macedonia or attempts to undermine the country's territorial integrity. Bearing in mind the different interpretations of the historical circumstances in the Balkans in the immediate neighborhood of the Republic of Macedonia, as well as the ethnic structure of the country, in that period there were real fears that the country's sovereignty could be called into question if the country does not become part of a more serious security system capable of providing security sustainability guarantees. In this context, it is important to emphasize that in November 1995, the Republic of Macedonia became the first member of the NATO program "Partnership for Peace", while already in June 1996 the Liaison office of the Republic of Macedonia was opened at the NATO headquarters („Патот до НАТО”, Министерство за одбрана, Република Северна Македонија). Thus, the Republic of Macedonia clearly defined one of its key foreign policy goals, the membership in NATO, but it has missed the opportunity to develop a clear and precise strategy on the security challenges it faces, as well as on the determinants that will influence the acceleration or deceleration of its path to full NATO membership.

By signing the Adriatic Charter, the Republic of Macedonia took an essential step towards the full membership in NATO. The Republic of Macedonia, together with Albania and Croatia, and with the support of the USA, signed the Adriatic Charter in the spring of 2003 at the level of foreign ministers and the US Secretary of State, whose goal was to ease the way of these three countries towards membership in NATO („Adriatic Charter”, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, U. S. Department of State, Washington, DC, 2008). The Adriatic Charter was signed on May 2, 2003 in Tirana, as a strategic document between Albania, Croatia, Macedonia and the USA on the incentive of the former President of the Republic of Macedonia Boris Trajkovski; he launched it at the NATO Summit in Prague on November 23, 2002 (Albulena, Fatmir, 2009). The main goal of this document was the joint coordination of the activities of the signatories of this strategic document, with the aim of fulfilling NATO's criteria and standards as quickly as possible, but also the comprehensive improvement of the situation in Southeast Europe in the direction of building peace, democracy, stability, and prosperity (Arnaudov, 2021. p. 97).

However, two years before the signing of the Adriatic Charter, the Republic of Macedonia faced an armed conflict in its north-western parts, provoked by a group of Albanian extremists whose original goal, according to existing data, was to occupy part of the Macedonian territory where dominant Albanian population lives, but during the conflict activities and battles between Albanian extremists and Macedonian security forces those

goals were transformed into a struggle for the human rights of Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia. This conflict was the first serious signal that the security situation in the Republic of Macedonia is fragile, that this country is not capable to ensure its political independence and territorial integrity without external support, and in the years after the conflict, the process of Euro-Atlantic integration was intensified with the aim of its accelerated NATO integration as a key guarantor of peace and security. However, 19 years passed from the signing of the Adriatic Charter to the full membership of the Republic of Macedonia in NATO. That path was filled with numerous challenges, security instabilities, internal political tensions, as well as pronounced regional disputes with NATO member states that had a direct impact on the achievement of this foreign political goal. Today, the Republic of North Macedonia, as a full member of NATO, also faces numerous security challenges that do not threaten its territorial integrity, as one of the key postulates of an independent and sovereign country, but which in the long term seriously jeopardizes its sustainability, political stability and economic predictability. At the beginning of the nineties, the membership in NATO was determined as a priority for preserving the territorial integrity of the Republic of Macedonia, but today this country is facing much more dangerous and modern challenges that exclude territorial integrity as a guarantee of the country's sustainability.

## **2. MEMBERSHIP IN NATO IN THE ERA OF NEW SECURITY CHALLENGES**

The Republic of North Macedonia, on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2020 became the newest member-state of NATO, after it had deposited the instruments of its accession in the USA State Department, the North Atlantic Alliance announced (RSE, Severna Makedonija i zvanično članica NATO-a, 2020). The ceremony of raising the flag of North Macedonia along with the flags of other member states was held on March 30<sup>th</sup> 2020 at the NATO headquarters in Brussels. The Republic of North Macedonia's long journey towards NATO has finally been achieved. One of the two key foreign policy goals of this country, in addition to joining the European Union, has been achieved. On that way, the Republic of North Macedonia was faced with an economic embargo, armed conflict, political tensions, huge criminal affairs, a change of constitutional name to finally become a member of the Alliance in a new reality. When the Republic of North Macedonia became a member of NATO, the traditionally known security threats were greatly changed. Interstate wars were not stopped, as we can see today with the example on the Ukrainian war. However, traditional threats, such as those that were the decisive factor for the authorities in Skopje to request the admission of their country to the Alliance, were no longer ongoing, nor do they represent a real threat to security in terms of political sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of North Macedonia. In fact, our country became a member of NATO when the world was faced with a global health pandemic which caused enormous problems not only for poor and developing countries, but also for large economic systems and developed political entities whose economies suffered enormous consequences due to the pervasive pandemic. Global pandemic with its pervasive power brought into question not only the role of NATO as a security and defence international alliance, but also the role of many other international organizations which deal with numerous topics, including global health. In such circumstances the membership in NATO of the Republic of North Macedonia was not at all an important topic for the society, but the manners the authorities could deal with the challenges that pandemic brings and whether the national system is ready to be efficient in

such reality. In fact, the pandemic Covid-19 brings us to the main question in this paper - what has changed in North Macedonia after its accession in NATO and did it overcome its security challenges? From today's perspective we could provide two answers, from two different angles, but one of them would be for sure more relevant.

First, the Republic of North Macedonia, with its accession in NATO, has, without doubts closed potential traditional threats when it comes to its territorial integrity and potentials for violations of its borders. NATO membership, bearing in mind the experience of longstanding member states, provides guarantees of territorial integrity. The clause of NATO that attack to one member state would be understood as an attack to the whole block provides clear guarantees that the national borders of the member states are pretty safe, especially when it comes to small member states, as it is the example with North Macedonia.

But, on the other side, contemporary security threats which the states are facing, especially small and developing states, are not automatically resolved with the NATO accession. Actual security threats such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the pervasive emigration of the young population, the low-level quality of life standards, economic unsustainability, as well as institutional inefficiency are the issues which the Republic of North Macedonia faced in the period before its NATO accession, but also after it has reached full NATO membership. Most of the problems, if we exclude the pandemic as a security threat that has appeared in the last two years, have been present in North Macedonia since its independence. We are talking about non-traditional security problems which in contemporary international relations greatly threaten the basic postulates of a state because they indirectly affect the ability of the state to retain a part of the population that emigrates due to the necessity for better living conditions, brings into question the state's economic sustainability through the loss of a capable workforce, makes public administration more cumbersome compared to the private sector and thus, through different integrated sectors, endanges the basic postulates on which statehood is based.

### **2.1. Covid-19 pandemic**

When we talk more specifically about the benefits of North Macedonia's membership in NATO in the fight against the pandemic, it is difficult to establish a large contribution. But we should not look at it from the point of view that membership in NATO is something that this country did not need, but from the point of view of internal institutional unpreparedness for this type of security challenge. At the beginning, on the eve of North Macedonia's official admission to NATO, the Alliance announced that North Macedonia is using the Next Generation Incident Command System (NICS) to coordinate the response to the crisis caused by the corona virus. "The system enables all the institutions of the Republic of North Macedonia, as well as organizations such as the Red Cross, to communicate and coordinate their activities as efficiently as possible. NICS also provides the public with pandemic news, advice and information on who to contact for food and drug questions" (BETA, Severna Makedonija koristi mehanizme NATO u borbi protiv epidemije korona virusa, 2020). On the other hand, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that NATO is not on the front line of defense in the fight against the pandemic, but that NATO members help each other, while the Alliance provides the necessary capacities (RSE, Stoltenberg za RSE: NATO pomoć u borbi protiv korona virusa, 2020). NATO members have helped North Macedonia in the fight against the pandemic by providing medical supplies. Hungary provided 100,000 protective masks and 5,000 protective suits, Slovenia provided 200,000 masks, and the Netherlands provided tests to determine the presence of the coronavirus (Glas Amerike, NATO članice šalju pomoć Severnoj Makedoniji, 2020). Also, at the end of 2020,

NATO donated 60 transport ventilators to North Macedonia worth 1.4 million euros from the pandemic response fund (Дојче веле, Сојузниците напомош во корона-кризата: НАТО донираше 60 респиратори, 2020). But that kind of donations during the pandemic did not contribute to a comprehensive solution to the problems that our country is facing in the health system. In that context, director of the Center for Foreign Policy at the Heritage Foundation based in Washington Luke Coffey said that NATO strategic concept was drawn up back in 2010 and that at that time, as stated, 'security challenges in the future' related to cyber-attacks and possible threats to existential energy sources while, unfortunately, the alliance did not take into account at the time, nor did it consider the danger of a potentially deadly global pandemic (Defrančeski, Luk Kofi: NATO bi morao da uradi više u borbi protiv koronavirusa, 2020). In fact, within the framework of NATO, there was no elaborate mechanism for combatting this modern type of threat, which does not recognize national borders, while, on the other hand, North Macedonia, despite becoming a permanent member of NATO, due to the neglect of the problems which its national health system was facing, it remained exposed to the dangers brought by the global pandemic, and was forced to seek external support, regardless of whether it is NATO member states or not, in order to manage to solve the challenges of the pandemic in a certain way, including the percentage of deaths in relation to the total number of the population. The example of Covid-19 pandemic in the Republic of North Macedonia, as a member-state of NATO, provides evidence that certain contemporary challenges and threats are not in correlation with the NATO membership, thus each member-state should also take into consideration how they face such threats, especially in the circumstances when even developed and huge countries are not able to provide quick and adequate help. Covid-19 pandemic from one side showed that even allies within NATO could not help each other in such circumstances which the mentioned global disease created, while, on the other side, it showed that certain contemporary global threats could not be resolved only through collective security mechanisms, such as NATO, but also require national institutional readiness, system's efficiency and political preparedness from strategic point of view.

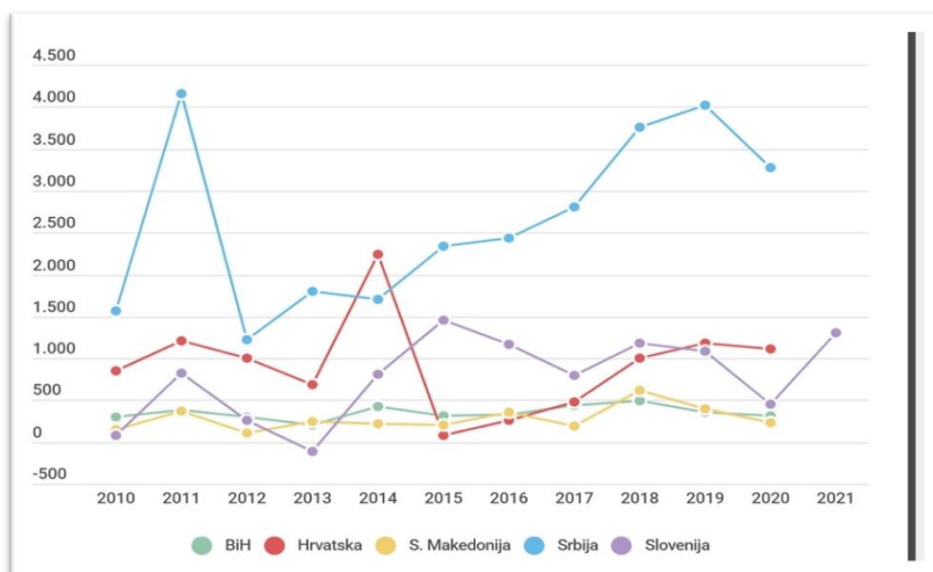
## **2.2. NATO membership as an economic opportunity?**

Over the years, Macedonian politicians have presented NATO membership as an opportunity to attract foreign direct investment. They justified the thesis by saying that the Republic of North Macedonia would represent a safe and stable environment, which is one of the key prerequisites for large investors when making decisions about new investments. The citizens expected an investment boom after the country joined the Alliance, but reality did not go in that direction, bearing in mind the new challenges which the global economy faced. In that context, as Gocevski and Gjurovski have stated, the theories of security and peace unequivocally indicate that one of the key factors for the promotion and preservation of the world peace is precisely raising the level of economic development of the countries (Gocevski, Gjurovski, 2017 p.20). The problems faced by the global economy due to the pandemic, as well as the processes of its restructuring due to new circumstances, have influenced that investment flows recorded a reduced intensity, bearing in mind that the economic flows in developed countries are also faced with numerous challenges as a result of the pandemic.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, the value of foreign direct investments is significantly reduced in 2020 compared to 2019. According to the data of National bank of the Republic of North Macedonia, the country received 171 million euros FDI in 2019, while that amount of FDI in 2020 was 97 million euros (Tomić, Antonijević, Pejović, 2021, p.61).

Furthermore, the Republic of North Macedonia has the largest decrease in FDI inflows in 2020, where the decrease compared to 2019 was around 43% for the first three quarters of 2020. At the same time Serbia attracted about 60% of total FDI in the Western Balkans region, which certainly contributes to the image of Serbia as the most attractive location for foreign capital investments in this part of Europe (NBS, Makroekonomska kretanja u Srbiji, 2021, op.cit), even though it is a country that is not part of NATO. When it comes to the purchasing power of the population, we can also state that the country is at the bottom not only of the European continent, but also of the Western Balkans, and only Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina are behind it. The purchasing power of one citizen is 44 percent compared to the European average, and in front of it are Serbia with 52 percent compared to the European average and Montenegro with 61 percent (Demostat, Kupovna moć građana Srbije među najnižim u Evropi, 2022).

**Table 1: FDI inflow by country in the region in million EUR**



Source: Bloomberg Adria (Retrieved from:

<https://rs.bloombergadria.com/analiza/region/3296/srbija-sustize-hrvatsku-ulagaci-u-regionu-traze-jeftinija-trzista/news/>, Accessed July 10 2022)

This table is a clear indication that the Republic of North Macedonia recorded the lowest growth of foreign direct investments in the past period, even though it is a country that became a member of NATO in the meantime, which leads us to open a new research question: Does NATO membership automatically lead to an investment boom for the countries that become part of the Alliance, or investment trends are primarily determined by numerous other parameters, which primarily depend on internal, that is, national institutional efficiency? Similar challenges, from the economic and financial point of view, are also in the area of incomes; this country is also positioned at the bottom in the region. The average monthly net salary per employee in the Republic of North Macedonia was 31,525 denars (514 euros) in April, according to data from the State Statistical Office (DZS), while at the same time the average salary in Serbia was 74,664 dinars (635 euros), according to data from the Serbian State Statistical Office (24sedam/Tanjung, Makedonci i dalje zaostaju sa platom:

Srpska raste duplo više, 2022). According to the data of the State Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the average monthly net salary paid in the first quarter of 2022 was 1,065 KM (545 euros), which indicates that only Albania has lower average monthly net salary in comparison to the Republic of North Macedonia. According to the National Statistical Institute of Albania, the average salary in Albania during the first quarter of 2022 was 59,242 ALL (€493.510) (Akta, BiH: Prosječna neto plata u prvom kvartalu 2022. godine iznosila 1.065 KM, 2022). These indicators, such as the average monthly salary, the level of foreign direct investments, as well as the purchasing power of the population, indicate that nothing essential has changed in the county since it became a full member of NATO. But this conclusion, as in the case of the fight against the global pandemic, should not mean that membership in NATO is a wrong foreign policy choice of the country, but rather the fact that the functionality of the internal system at all levels largely determines the solution to challenges and emerging security problems, and that membership in NATO by automatism does not mean solving of all the existing problems existent in the country. Why is this important? Because many of these problems also indirectly contribute to the fragile security mosaic of this country, which is not in direct correlation with NATO membership.

### **2.3. Institutional inefficiency as a determinant of security challenges**

One of the most complex questions nowadays posed to political elites in the world, to institutions working with the study of peace and security, but also to the security community, is to provide an objective assessment of possible sources that threaten peace and security at local, regional, and global level (Gocevski, Gjurovski, 2017 p.50). When it comes to the institutional infrastructure of the Republic of North Macedonia, we have to point out that there are numerous institutional problems which accompany the change of the political elite, and are continuously piling up despite the rhetorical insistence on the necessity of public administration reform as one of the key preconditions on the way to European integration. Numerous international organizations and institutions in their annual reports emphasize the necessity of public administration reforms, emphasize its cumbersomeness, as well as the inefficiency in providing services to citizens. Political elitism, pervasive corruption, and incompetence are one of the main challenges of the institutional system in the Republic of North Macedonia.

The most relevant example for such claims is the European Commission Annual Report for the Republic of North Macedonia which stresses out that this country is moderately prepared in the reform of its public administration (European Commission Annual Report for the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021, p.13). As it is stated in the report "most of last year's recommendations have been partially implemented. In the coming period, the country should, in particular: adopt and implement the revised Law on Administrative Servants, the Law on Public Service Employees and the Law on Top Management Service; adopt and implement the Law on State Organisation and other related laws in line with the recommendations for the new organisation of state administrative bodies and ensure full implementation of the Law on General Administrative Procedures" (European Commission Annual Report for the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021, p. 13). On the other hand, in the same European Commission report it is stated that "the Republic of North Macedonia has some level of preparation/is moderately prepared in the prevention and fight against corruption" (European Commission Annual Report for the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021, p. 5), which does not lead us to the conclusion that this country has achieved huge success in the fight against corruption at all levels. When it comes to the fight against organized crimes, European Commission report for 2021 points out that "the

legislative framework of the Republic of North Macedonia is broadly in line with the European standards and efforts to implement strategies against organised crime must continue, that some progress was made at the operational level, but it is also necessary to improve the effectiveness of law enforcement in fighting certain forms of crime, such as money laundering and financial crimes" (European Commission Annual Report for the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021, p. 5) European Commission in its report for 2021 points out that institutional capacities of the Republic of North Macedonia remain limited through the following conclusion: "The capacities of the Ministry of Interior for prevention, detection and investigating of criminal offences related to counterfeiting money, remain limited. There is still insufficient coordination among the key institutions in the system" (European Commission Annual Report for the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021, p. 63).

When we analyze the corruption as a key institutional challenge of the public administration in the Republic of North Macedonia, we have to point out that also in the USA State Department Human Rights Report 2021 for the Republic of North Macedonia it is mentioned that "the (Macedonian) law provides criminal penalties for conviction of corruption by officials, that the government generally implemented the law, but that there were reports about officials engaged in corruption" (USA State Department, North Macedonia Human Rights Report, 2021). Also, according to the same report, „NGOs stated that the Government’s dominant role in the economy created opportunities for corruption, as well as that it was the country’s largest employer“ (USA State Department, North Macedonia Human Rights Report, 2021). These reports provide a clear picture for the institutional and systemic problems in our country. We are talking about internal all-pervading challenges, determined on one hand by inaction, and on the other hand determined by wrong policies, which in the long term contribution to the erosion of the institutional infrastructure of this country, and therefore directly and indirectly bring into question the sustainability of the state system, which is a serious and substantial security challenge.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

The path of the Republic of North Macedonia to full membership in NATO took quite a long time, bearing in mind that more than twenty years passed since the moment of its integration into the Partnership for Peace program until its full membership. By joining NATO, the Republic of North Macedonia managed to achieve one of its two key foreign policy goals thirty years after gaining the independence. Integration into NATO in the case of the Republic of North Macedonia was subject to numerous criteria, some of which were not objective on that path, such as regional disputes. But also the internal problems of this country, from institutional, through political, to security, have contributed to the fact that the realization of this foreign policy goal takes a long time, and it is often uncertain. In fact, at the time when this country became part of the Alliance, there were no real and sustainable threats against its territorial sovereignty. Second, the classic security challenges faced by NATO thirty years ago are no longer the focus of this collective security community. Although, as we stated at the beginning, we are still witnessing interstate conflicts, NATO in modern international relations is dedicated to newly emerging threats, such as cybercrime and attacks, economic wars, but also health challenges such as Covid-19, which we have also mentioned on the example of our country. In this context, based on the actual and changed security challenges of NATO, but also on the fact that the territorial integrity has not been threatened for many years, more specifically after the end of the conflict in the northwestern parts of this country in 2001, we can conclude that the group of security



challenges of the Republic of North Macedonia are not determined by its membership in the Alliance, nor does membership contribute to their resolution. As we explained in the paper, we are talking about modern security challenges, which by definition do not represent classic security threats, but in the long term, continuously and indirectly destabilize the environment of a country. In the case of the Republic of North Macedonia, we are talking about threats such as institutional inefficiency, a bad and unstable economic environment and a vulnerable health system that directly contributes to endangering human security in the Macedonian society. These threats greatly affect the security mosaic of the country because, when it comes to the economy, economic unsustainability contributes to tensions in society, increased migration and poverty, when it comes to institutional cumbersome, corrupt and inefficient institutions contribute to social dissatisfaction and thus distrust in public administration, and when it comes to the health system, an unorganized health system contributes to the deterioration of the economic capacities of a society by not responding to the needs of the population in a timely manner and thus reducing the working population. From a theoretical point of view, in this paper we have shown that the integration of small and micro states into collective security systems does not automatically mean solving all security issues and challenges faced by these groups of countries. We have proven this on the example of the Republic of North Macedonia. From a long-term perspective, small and micro states, and also developing states, enjoy numerous benefits and advantages from full membership in collective security systems, but membership as an official act, as we have proven in the case of North Macedonia, automatically does not contribute to the solution of institutional challenges, health problems, or economic difficulties.

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