

MACEDONIA'S GEOPOLITICAL ALIGNMENT: NAVIGATING WITHOUT A COMPASS IN THE MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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The Macedonian elites have adhered to the so-called TINA principle (There Is No Alternative) for most of the state's independent existence. Regardless of their ideological position on the specter, they shared a consensus that the country's future and prosperity lie solely in becoming members of NATO and the European Union. While the full membership in NATO was achieved in March 2020, it came at a high national cost. The EU membership remains as elusive as ever. Meanwhile, the world has dramatically changed due to the complex multipol transformation. This article highlights North Macedonia's (hereafter in the text, Macedonia) inability to craft an independent foreign and domestic policy. The key premise is that the country has aligned itself with the declining and militarized West, often against its national interests. This alignment places Macedonia in a confrontational stance toward the Rest, again at a high cost to its national interests. It appears to be a lose-lose situation.

Biljana Vankovska*

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* Professor Biljana Vankovska is a Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Ss. Cyril and Methodis University, Skopje, Macedonia.

The most appropriate phrase that captures the current state of global affairs is something Antonio Gramsci wrote in 1929: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”¹ Slavoj Žižek rephrase it in the following (more popular) way: “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.” Undoubtedly, after the failure of the peace dividend expected after the fall of the Berlin wall, also the unipolar moment of the only superpower (USA) is far gone. Hegemons have problems accepting reality, and any rivalry (in economic or other field) is seen as an inimical act and threat to national security.

The international relations and the position of certain great powers (notably, China) had already been changing.² Still, the Ukraine project was the turning point: first in 2014 (Euromaidan)³ and then the escalation of a military situation after the failure of the Minsk Agreements. The Euromaidan regime change, inspired by external forces, raised many academic and policy discussions if the world was entering a Second Cold War.⁴ But, the aftermath of the 2022 developments in Ukraine (and in addition the growing tensions over the Taiwan Strait) have now raised up global fears of a cloud of a possible nuclear disaster. Looking from the bright side, the decline of the Western dominance is a reason for hope among many nations that suffered under liberal interventionism, neocolonialism, and exploitation.

Although the phrase “the West and the Rest” has entered the vocabulary, the more correct one should read “the West and the Global Majority”. Perceptions on what is going on in the West and the Rest differ, as each side see the “monster” in the image of the ‘Other’. Hence a Cambridge report⁵ shows that among the 1.2 billion people who live in liberal democracies, 75 percent hold a negative view of China, while 87 percent hold a negative view of Russia. However, for those who live in the majority of the world, the perception is reversed: 70 percent feel positive toward China, and 66 percent feel positive toward Russia. Together with the rising influence of the BRICS group of nations, this growing North-South divide is accelerating a shift to a multipolar order. Also, many surveys show that the Western population (especially, the youth) shows signs of pessimism and anxiety, while

1) Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith ed. and trans. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971): 276.

2) China has become the second largest economy next to the United States since 2010. See more in: Huiyun Feng, Kai He and Yan Xuetong (eds), *Chinese Scholars and Foreign Policy Debating International Relations* (London and NY, Routledge, 2019).

3) John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin”, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014, available at <https://www.mearsheimer.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Why-the-Ukraine-Crisis-Is.pdf>

4) Richard Sakwa, *The Lost Peace: How the West Failed to Prevent a Second Cold War* (Yale University Press, 2023).

5) Roberto S. Foa et al, *A World Divided Russia, China and the West*, University of Cambridge, Centre for the Future of Democracy, October 2022, available at https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/A_World_Divided.pdf

in the ‘East’ there is growing optimism about the future and personal wellbeing. Some scholars rightly argue that the dynamic interplay of multivector factors at the time being call for a careful deliberation and distinction between multipolarism and multipolarity. The number and the size of the new “poles” is still in the making, and it’s hard to predict how the world will look like in a decade (if not sooner). Although one could offer historical facts that multipolarity is nothing new in IR, the return of great powers politics looks more like a classical (war-like) geopolitics, bringing a lot of risks and turmoil. However, many scholars and public intellectuals are already engaged in the promotion of cooperative multipolar system and geopolitics of peace. Even if the great rivals manage to avoid nuclear confrontation, this great transformation affects certain unstable regions (faultlines) where these states confront or border. The worst prognosis is related to the regions in which conflict potential already exists. Unfortunately, the so-called Western Balkans is one of them.

The Uncertain Configuration of Western Balkans

In her book “Imagining the Balkans”,⁶ Bulgarian scholar Maria Todorova de-facto offered a brilliant description of Balkanism (i.e. the Western stereotypes of the region) based on Edward Said’s memorable “Orientalism”.⁷ Unfortunately, the basic conclusions haven’t changed despite the alleged Europeanization of the region (through EU enlargement policy). As if echoing an old Baltic German philosopher’s phrase (“If the Balkans hadn’t existed, they would have been invented”), right after the Yugoslavia’s collapse, the West (mostly NATO and EU) practically invented the so-called Western Balkans. This pseudo-region exists only in the political imagination of Brussels and Washington. Still, due to the persistent propaganda and tutoring, it has penetrated the vocabulary of respective political elites, scholars and intellectuals as if has existed forever. The portrait of this region resembles a broken mirror. It represents a series of semi-protectorates that have been following Western medicines for decades in hope that one day they will be welcomed and embraced in the “European family”.⁸

Actually, the EU state-building in its ‘near neighborhood’ is one of the key reasons for the state of affairs at the moment. The fall of Yugoslavia enabled formation of seven (allegedly) independent states, but few of them are “finished” and sustainable. The Balkans (alike the Middle East) used to be and still is a litmus test and a field for various Western-made experiments in state-building. The long-lasting and futile process of EU (non)integration, and the economic needs of the respective states in

6) Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, updated edition (Oxford University Press, 2009).

7) Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (NY: Vintage Books, 1994).

8) Actually, the European Union has the inner tendency to falsely present herself as Europe, which does not fit the facts. But this approach has made a great impact on self-perception of the inhabitants of this region who see themselves as less worthy, not-quite-European, and inferior population that is unable to exercise the right to self-determination and sovereignty, even in constitutional affairs.

the region, resulted in a greater interest for the rest of the world. Obviously, Serbia proved to be a champion in this respect, thanks to her prudent use of the old Yugoslav (diplomatic) traditions and connections with the so-called Third World, but also due to the developed academic and policy-making circles that did not shy away from exploring new alternatives in the era of multipolarity.⁹ Gradually, the so-called Western Balkan (an EU ghetto for unwanted neighbors, or a troublesome frontier with the Rest of the world) has become a microcosm of multipolarity, inter alia, because of reciprocal interest by other non-Western powers, such as Russia, China, Emirates, India, etc. Maybe not as stark an example as Serbia, yet many Balkan states have opened the doors for foreign enterprises and projects desperately needing development and infrastructure building. Hungary (seen as an infant terrible in the EU/NATO circles) has decided to protect its own national interests first. Bulgaria, another member state of NATO and EU, goes through internal divisions over the geopolitical decision-making, but still does not close the door of cooperation with non-Western partners. The same applies to Greece. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a special case due to the internal fractures, and the rogue position of Republika Srpska that is willing to cooperate with whoever wants to invest in the impoverished entity. Montenegro and Albania have had quite a lot of experiences cooperating with China, especially.

The Western power centers did not stand still. It did not take long to undertake disciplinary measures in order to secure the loyalty of the Balkan pawns (mis)using their internal or regional disputes and weaknesses. In addition to the traditional “stick and carrot” mechanisms, USA and EU have seen an urgent need to respond to (especially, China’s) soft power incursions. The number of NGOs, think tanks, media portals, etc. has exploded in the last few years. The well-known US and European foundations and policy-making centers, embassies, etc. fund the majority of them. The EU’s control mechanisms and fact-checkers are particularly influential as they often create regional hubs and networks.¹⁰ Another similar platform is CHOICE. It represents itself in the following way: “CHOICE is a multinational consortium of experts providing informed analysis on the rising influence of the

9) See more: Dušan Prorokovic, *Era multipolarnosti* (Beograd: Sluzbeni glasnik, 2018).

10) For instance, Antidinfo.net describes its mission in the following way: “The Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans (ADN-Balkans) serves as the basis of a cooperation between civil society organizations, media outlets, educational institutions and all other relevant stakeholders with a goal of forming a wide front on countering disinformation through affirmation of the highest standards of fact-checking and all other ethical principles of professional journalism, as well as promoting media literacy and critical thinking.” ADN-Balkans brings together the following NGOs from the Western Balkans and neighboring EU countries, Bulgaria and Greece: Metamorphosis, Foundation for Internet and Society from North Macedonia, founder of Truthmeter.mk, Portalb.mk and Meta.mk, Faktoje.al from Albania, JAJ.gr (Journalists About Journalism) from Greece, empowered by News Literacy Center, NGO for Media & News Literacy, Crno beli svet (CBS), organization and online portal from Kosovo, Peace Journalism Lab, School of Journalism and Mass Media Communication, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, Digital Communication Network SouthEast Europe Hub, Greece, Istinomer from Serbia, Ellinika Hoaxes from Greece, Internews Kosova, founder of KALLXO from Kosovo, BlueLink Foundation, founder of Evromegdan and BlueLink Stories from Bulgaria. It is noteworthy that a group of the same experts often work on multiple similar projects, suggesting a profit-driven engagement rather than a genuinely broad and effective influence of these NGOs.

People's Republic of China within the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. CHOICE provides a platform for discussion, information sharing, best practices, and collaboration for its members monitoring and evaluating Chinese activity in CEE.”¹¹

It is enough to just look at the titles of the reports/articles, and the conclusion is self-evident: hardly any text is favorable about China's role in the region/Europe. Surely, since February 2022 the main focus is on “Russian influence”, but China is mentioned right away, next to Russia. On the other hand, in the public it is hard to detect any particular response to such accusations by China or its officials, embassies, etc. Actually, the public appearances of the Chinese diplomats are rare, while the public has no opportunities to see and hear the Chinese intellectuals, journalists, professors, experts, etc. The Western opinion-makers have total dominance over the public space but it does not satisfy the fact-checkers who want no other influence whatsoever.

The Curious Case of Macedonia's Loyalty to the West

The price that the Macedonian people and state have paid for the sake of NATO (and potentially EU) membership is so peculiar and bizarre that it is hard to explain such a foreign policy that brings more costs than benefits. Bearing in mind that the foreign and domestic policies are deeply intertwined, one could say that Western tutelage stripped away Macedonian statehood and sovereignty, making it even less stateless than it was in 1991. One could use as a metaphor the title of the famous novel of Scott Fitzgerald, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. In simple words, the longer the Europeanization process takes, the less mature and sustainable Macedonia becomes. Actually, due to the pressures both from the neighboring states (Greece and Bulgaria), who have nothing to do with the Copenhagen criteria but with identity issues and nation's recognition as such, Macedonia gets further away from the final goal – even the start of the negotiation process becomes the unreachable aim. To make things more ironic, Ukraine started the negotiation process in the midst of a war under the martial law. At the same time, Macedonia is still blackmailed to change the constitution (i.e. to include the Bulgarians as a constitutive nation) and to pay respect to the name deal concluded with Greece against the jus cogens norms of the international law.

This particular sui generis case of Westernization/Europeanization has been discussed elsewhere,¹² but the end result is dreadful. To paraphrase brilliant Romanian scholar, Bogdan Stefanescu,¹³ Macedonia has also (as some other

11) CHOICE, available at <https://chinaobservers.eu/>

12) Ristevska Jordanova Malinka and Simonida Kacarska, EU - North Macedonia accession negotiations: the implications of the Bulgarian conditions, Skopje: EPI, 2020, available at <https://epi.org.mk/post/team/putting-citizens-first-exploring-public-perceptions-of-administrative-services-in?lang=en>; Biljana Vankovska, “Guiding Macedonia to the EU: Walking Over European Values”. In: Branislav Radeljic (ed.), *The (Un)Wanted Europeaness. Understanding Division and Inclusion in Contemporary Europe* (Berlin: DeGruyter); Adrian Waters, “The Impact of EU State-Building Policies on the Democratization Process in Macedonia - a Realist Analysis”, *Security Dialogues*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2021).

13) Bogdan Stefanescu, *Postcommunism/Postcolonialism: Siblings of Subalternity*, (Bucharesti, 2012).

postcommunist states) experienced historical vacancy (void of historical action), a significant silence (void of vocality), anonymous Macedonians who must not name themselves as Macedonians (void of personality) and eventually, rigor mortis (void of vitality). All that was accepted through externally imposed treaties and constitutional engineering for the sake of a bright future in an imagined EU, which is now trembling amidst a combination of political, financial, migrant and war crises.

In fact, the previous Macedonian government of Nikola Gruevski (2006-2016) made an attempt to catch up with the changing world and dared 'look eastward'. Gruevski was punished and disciplined rather quickly for his stubbornness (unwillingness to change the name of the state) and for his non-Western initiatives (bringing foreign investors from the non-Western parts of the world, contracting Chinese construction company to build highways, and mostly for the interest to join the Russian pipeline project known as South Stream, which failed due to geopolitical reasons – although not so spectacularly as the North Stream). The culmination of the Western disciplinary power was the so-called Colorful Revolution (2015/2016) that toppled down the government and brought in a more cooperative leader, such as Zoran Zaev). The Chinese projects were immediately framed as corruptive and even substandard. Instead, a few years later, the most expensive construction project was given to Behtel&Enka Corporation against the domestic regulations and EU standards. Geo-economics met geopolitics, but also served well the ethnic Albanian interests in bringing all Albanian-populated areas closer and faster together.

Macedonia celebrated the fourth anniversary of joining NATO in March 2024. However, the illusion of gaining increased security, economic attractiveness for foreign investors and well-being was short-lived. As soon as the Covid-19 anxiety came to its end, the Ukraine war has changed everything. Not only NATO got involved into a proxy war with Russia, but its member-states get engaged into showing full loyalty to Brussels by offering military assistance to a non-NATO state but also followed the Alliance's geopolitical directions both vis-à-vis Russia and China. The negative effects of these currents have affected all sectors: Macedonia's budget allocations have gone beyond 2 percent of GDP,¹⁴ while the economic trends were going downhill. No foreign investors arrived, while the Chinese projects are not quite welcome. Furthermore, the sanctions against Russia had a self-harming effect especially for the agricultural sector. The global politics has become biopolitics, politics of life or death (due to the looming nuclear Armageddon).

Ironically, throughout the years, the Macedonian citizens got persuaded that NATO membership was the only way to reach the more desired goal: the EU membership

14) Out of 32 countries, Macedonia belongs to the group of 18 whose defense budgets went beyond the 2 percent requirement from the Wales summit. This fact gets more importance in one of the poorest and least developed European states.

(or better, the economic and social benefits of EU membership). The examples of a few EU states that are not parts of NATO were not sufficiently persuasive, because the U.S. and NATO experts de facto designed national security model. In mid-2024 one could argue that the EU (the Western Balkan's states dreamt of) has turned into a civilian subcontractor of NATO, also fully focused on security issues (Ukraine and migration, are just two of the most important ones in the long list of insecurities). Even the elections for the EU Parliament proved that the debate focused more on fears from war and the needs for greater security rather than on citizens' well-being, energy security, climate change, etc. Despite all these changes both in NATO and the EU, Macedonia apparently remains one of the most loyal pro-Western states in the Western Balkans. The reason is simple: during the plus three decades of independence, the political elites have never ever discussed any other option for military security, economic development, or cooperation with other parts of the world. Former Vice Prime Minister Artan Grubi spelled this foreign policy in a very illustrious way: "for us in Macedonia, the sun rises on the West".

As seen from the Macedonian perspective, local politicians hardly take these seismic changes seriously. The obsession with fully belonging (politically, militarily, economically and culturally) with the West is a constant for almost three decades. Interestingly, Macedonia (unlike Serbia, and even some other parts of ex-Yugoslavia) did not take advantage of any good experiences that originated with the decades-long affiliation with the Non-Alignment Movement during the Cold War. Bearing in mind that the country had to pay a dear prize for the NATO membership and did not get anything in return, it is strange that the public support for the pro-Western orientation did not fall more than the public opinion polls show today. Yet, the facts speak volumes for a country that cherished up to 80-90 percent approval for NATO and EU, and today the support of approximately 60 percent is celebrated as a success.¹⁵ In fact four years later, the support for NATO has dropped down for more than 10 percent (similar tendencies can be found in Montenegro too).¹⁶ However, the more insightful analysis shows that the figures would have been even more worrisome if the polls focus on the majority of the (ethnic Macedonian and non-Albanian) population. The discrepancies are striking, as the ethnic Albanians in Macedonia still hold highest esteem for NATO (80-90 percent) in contrast to the others with only 30-40 percent support. This is an important indication because the narrative used in the past argued that the membership to NATO/EU is practically the only 'glue' that kept the divided society together.

The latest presidential and parliamentary elections (April/May 2024) displayed a rather monotonous foreign policy perspective offered by the political parties and presidential

15) See, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33w3JW3bptE>

16) Adela M. Gjorgjioska, "Counting the Costs: Macedonia's 4-year NATO Membership in Review", *China-CEE Institute Weekly Briefing*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (March 2024).

candidates¹⁷ – with only one exception.¹⁸ Although some political parties/coalitions from the so-called Albanian block tried to frame the electoral struggle in geopolitical terms such as “either EU or Russia”.¹⁹ This approach lacked substance because it did not address the internal divisions (as they do not exist along such geopolitical lines) but were signals sent to the Western power centers, which usually influence electoral outcomes and coalition government formations. Bearing in mind that former foreign minister Osmani, who was a presidential candidate, lost the elections just like his party coalition named “European Front”, apparently the citizens chose Russia. However, that does not fit the facts: new president and the government are staunch supporters of the West, including NATO and EU. Nothing new on the foreign policy field. It is not hard to predict that the newly elected establishment will face dramatic events during its mandate. The rhetoric and the first indications are that the ruling coalition will remain even more loyal to the Western alignment, including the Ukraine policy. One can only wonder if anyone in the country is aware of the tectonic changes that are knocking on the door.

17) Adela M. Gjorgjioska, “Foreign Policy in the 2024 Presidential Election Campaigns”, *China-CEE Institute Weekly Briefing*, Vol. 72, No. 4, April 2024, available at <https://china-cee.eu/2024/05/14/north-macedonia-external-relations-briefing-foreign-policy-in-the-2024-presidential-election-campaigns/>

18) The political party Levica/The Left was the only one to propose abandoning NATO membership and opening a new multivector foreign policy, i.e. developing closer relations with non-Western forms of cooperation in different sectors (BRICS, Non-Alignment Movement, etc.).

19) Глас, „Османи од Минхен: На овие избори граѓаните ќе се одлучат за Европа или Русија“, 17 February 2024, available at <https://glas.mk/2024/02/османи-од-минхен-на-овие-избори-граѓан/>