

Biljana VANKOVSKA

**THE NATO MEMBERSHIP: ON
THE FRONTLINE?**

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Reviewers:

Jan Øberg
James Pettifer

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Foreword by the Reviewers

It's been a brain and heart-warming experience to read Dr. Biljana Vankovska's very illuminating, fact-based exposé on Macedonia and the wider Balkans' continuously problematic relations with the larger West, the US/NATO in particular. She is writing at a moment in Western political and intellectual history where at least three things have clearly emerged with deplorable results, in particular after the end of the first Cold War in 1989-1990, namely a) the de facto squeezing out of what might be called a peace and conflict-resolution (or violence-reducing) discourse in most societies' public debates about defence and security - both in science, in politics and the media; b) the disappearance of research on security matters that is genuinely independent of the governments and corporations that predominantly decide and run those affairs and whose elites benefit from them, and c) the Western hemisphere's increasing tendency to operate on the assumption of TINA (There Is No Alternative) which is by definition false since democracy cannot exist without alternative.

There are of course other trends of our time, but what unites the above-mentioned is that they have emerged simultaneously with and signal the manifest destiny of relative decline of the West. In a self-confident, visionary, democratic and convivial West, such things and trends would be unthinkable. It is, therefore, a very important task Dr Vankovska has set herself right now - and also a couple of decades after the West's intervention in the Balkans, namely to fundamentally challenge the results of those Western crisis phenomena as they manifest themselves in the region she has her focus on and has lived in for decades. Such intellectually and morally free-spirited but also academically well-grounded voices have become a rarity in today's West.

Dr. Vankovska's analysis makes an innovative, non-mainstream argument that builds on an impressive empirical knowledge base. It seems to me that her theoretical assumptions are less clearly stated which make the exposé somewhat weaker when it comes to the interaction between theory and data. Likewise, I find it delightful as well as urgently important in terms of criticism of the policies conducted on the stage she is observing but somewhat weaker in terms of alternatives. I believe that one can argue that

it is part of the research process to conduct but a diagnosis and a prognosis as well as deliver a proposal for treatment. Thus, an alert academic/intellectual reader would be justified in asking upon coming to the end: What should have been done, instead? The lack of such stating of alternatives is explained of course by the fact that Macedonia's membership of NATO is now an empirical reality that is not likely to change in the near future, or - put differently - not before NATO dissolves formally. However, I would not exclude that Vankovska's analysis would be stronger or even more convincing intellectually and ethically if it had contained a section about possible other pathways in the past such as - say - a regional security and conflict-resolution mechanism, the idea of security communities, human and common security thinking, security built on a balanced mix of conventional military defensive defence + civil defence + conflict-resolution + nonviolence ("combi defence") - or some of this under the umbrella of a consistent neutrality position aiming at softening security borders between the existing NATO and Russia (confidence-building and tension reduction).

Having read this analysis, a foreigner can hardly be anything but deeply surprised that countries coming out of what they considered the authoritarian claws of a centre - be it Moscow or Belgrade - so fast accept the foreign-imposed idea that they must immediately give up their newly won sovereignty as well as politico-intellectual freedom and obey His Master's Voice, so to speak - in this case a new centre, be in Washington or Brussels (NATO/EU) - neither of which come across these very years as stable constructions when seen in the perspective of just the next just 4-10 years, and beyond. Paradoxically, this whole sliding submissively into much more subordinate position than what they came out in freedom from when the Soviet Union/Warsaw Pact and, later, Yugoslavia dissolved, is one of the greatest enigmas in modern European history. Dr Vankovska describes brilliantly and with so many quotations and facts how all those domestic elements of wishful thinking and all the promises of US/NATO made from the outside - a sort of push/pull devoid of serious analysis and real political decision-making (not to speak about public debate), is contradictory beyond the possibility that a country such as Macedonia will ever benefit from its governments' recently chosen path. One of the many theories I sense that she is building on is that of unity of supra-national interests among elites - domestic and foreign - and disconnection and even fragmenting relations with their respective peripheral constituencies - i.e. their own citizens. That in and of itself should be one of the deepest concerns in contemporary

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democratic society. She spells out extremely well on almost every page how it works and how tilted it's cost-benefit is - and will be for her country and region.

Without claiming that it delivers the whole truth - no study does - about these enormously complex matters, it shows beyond any doubt and in a scholarly solid manner a very large - and regrettably also systematically politically repressed - element of the truth about contemporary European, Balkan politics and the role of various governments of Macedonia in it. Biljana Vankovska's study deserves, in my view - and I have been in and out of the Yugoslav space since 1974 and am a co-author of the largest study on the dissolution of Yugoslavia and what should have been done instead based on about 100 fact-finding missions and 3000 interviews all over the space and at all levels - the largest possible circulation in NATO and EU countries. Very few decision-makers in the West have any comprehensive knowledge of the immense complexities that are the Balkans. Now, two decades later, they would do wise to listen to "other voices" than their own and perhaps reflect over their one-dimensional political thinking during the last good 30 years. It should never be too late, and the West has always, also from a human rights and freedom of speech and free research perspective, cherished the views of truthful and courageous dissidents.

Jan Oberg

PhD, research director and co-founder

The Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research, TFF

Lund, Sweden

It is not surprising that in the year when Macedonia has become the 30th NATO member state, a book should appear assessing the national gains and losses as well as the strength and weaknesses of the alliance of today, including speculating about its future role in a rather insecure world. Biljana Vankovska's monograph is a timely publication from a scholar who has been known for her independent observation of both national and international developments in the security arena. Just as in the other post-socialist states that aspired to join NATO (and consequently, the EU) the dominant academic

and policy-oriented production on NATO membership (as well as on the Alliance as such) in Macedonia too had been rather one-dimensional: emphasizing merely the positive sides of the membership status and uncritical view of the Alliance as something good per se, without into account the dialectics of the international, regional and internal currents.

Vankovska's findings are consistent and logical. She rightly notes that accessing NATO is not an end but a beginning of a new chapter for the country. In that context, she points out that NATO membership per se does not bring absolute security but also imposes new types of responsibilities and dealing with new insecurities. Despite the NATO membership, the country's internal weaknesses are deep, while the regional turbulences affect them in addition. Unfortunately, NATO is not the organization that is able to provide medicines for most of these flaws, while its inherent internal divisions add to the already existing problems.

This publication is indeed something novel and thought-provoking precisely because the author avoids predictable academic reporting. She does not shy away from identifying NATO's major current challenges, and the ways in which the Alliance is trying to avoid 'brain death' through the newly presented report on NATO 2030. The whole manuscript is a forward-thinking and very up-to-date analysis of development that are ongoing (and thus academically challenging for analysis) rather than reproducing and recycling what has already been known about NATO and its enlargement.

It is particularly enlightening that the text deals with the concept of security in a holistic way, thus avoiding the trap of the dominant narrative of providing military, political and economic security by default, especially having in mind the challenges posed by the covid-19 pandemic. Unlike most manuscripts, which take longer time to materialise and are often outdated when they are published, this one is remarkably up-to-date. It is also an effective antidote to the dominant literature that presents NATO as the 'mightiest and the most efficient alliance in human history'. NATO exists and strives to preserve its attractiveness even beyond its area, while facing internal division and decline and this book goes a long way in answering why the difficulties exist.

This monograph is not just another in the range of theoretical elaborations of NATO enlargement and its effect on the new member-state. Its ambitions are higher as it introduces a novel analytical approach that intends to widen research horizons but also to develop debates both in the academic and policy-oriented circles. It is a very readable and comprehensive

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text that will meet the interest and expectations of the general readership. I believe that the literature like this may help students of security and peace studies as well as of international relations get a better overview of the dynamic international constellations and the position and challenges that Macedonia is likely to meet in the future.

James Pettifer,
St Cross College, Oxford University

Introduction

North Macedonia (hereafter in the text, Macedonia) was officially admitted to NATO on 27 March 2020 as its 30th member state. It was supposed to look like a dream come true for generations of Macedonian citizens and the political elites across the ethnic divides. However, the act was hardly met with any euphoria. At first it looked as if the initial shock and fear of covid-19 pandemic had taken its toll (as anywhere in the world) but even months later the citizens do not feel any change in their lives or pride for their country's membership of the mightiest military alliance in world history. During a recent public defense of his Ph.D. thesis a former Macedonian ambassador to NATO disclosed: "We [in the Foreign Ministry] are not still quite aware it's true. We are still getting to know NATO from within."

The state leadership officially expressed the state's will to join the North Atlantic Alliance as early as 1993. In 1995 the state joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), while 1999 witnessed the submission of the country's first Membership Action Plan (MAP). In total, 27 years was wasted in terms of lack of any meaningful public debate and policy considerations on foreign and security policy. As anywhere in the ex-socialist world, NATO and the EU have been embedded in the matrix of the TINA principle (*There Is No Alternative*). In practice, this has incapacitated and discouraged any meaningful and critical debate over any other foreign policy and security alternatives – and for the same reason, any debate over the economic and political substantial issues. While many societies within NATO repeatedly debate the key issue "more weapons or more butter", the Macedonian leadership never asked about the price (material or other), ready to pay whatever necessary for formal membership. I still remember, among others, my participation at a 2010 conference "Normative Shifts in Democratic Conceptions of the Soldier after the End of the Cold War: From Defenders of the Nation to Warriors for Global Peace" organized by the Peace Research Institute from Frankfurt. My talk was about Macedonia's path to NATO, with a special reference to its internal (socio-economic and other) challenges. My colleagues (all from the West) exclaimed unanimously: why on earth such a small and poor country invest so much into the membership of a military

alliance? It was hard to explain the scope of public expectations from NATO and the establishment's conviction that it was a must!

Now as Macedonia has joined the Alliance formally, any *post festum* deliberation on NATO membership may seem an obsolete endeavor. However, any serious state and leadership think in relative and non-fatalistic terms: the alliances are based on interests and they are not eternal; on the other hand, national interests are (or should be) a principal driving force for the future. The key question (although a rhetorical one) reads: have the Macedonian state and elites matured enough to grasp this wisdom?

The basic premise of this study is that social, (geo) political and (geo) economic realities and constellations in the world are variable. Something that seems self-evident does not appear so obvious to the Macedonian establishment. NATO and for the same reason the EU of the 1990s is not the same as this year's, due to the influence of a number of factors. The same applies to the Macedonian state and the Balkan region. No wonder, even the oldest NATO member-states do not always rely on the alliance's rules and assistance but undertake a number of independent actions for the sake of their national interests that may be divergent from the collective ones. Bearing this in mind, the Macedonian leadership and society should re-think expectations from the NATO membership in the view of the variable international setting and the protection of national interests. The lessons learned in this context could and should be applied to any other/future allegiance to international organizations and predetermined strategic goals. This is particularly true in the light of the recent tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean between two NATO member-states (Turkey and Greece). In general, this study is focused on exploration of the implications of the NATO membership on the Macedonian state interests on three levels: international, regional and national.

Although Macedonia has joined NATO the political narrative and public (media and intellectual) rhetoric have not changed a bit. The military alliance is still seen through rose-colored eyeglasses with not much relation to the objective state of affairs. It shows that the submissive and even naïve position in the mind and behavior of the political elites is unlikely to change any time soon. Actually, they are still pretending to be buoyant and triumphant (especially with respect to the political opposition) amidst the growing collapse caused by a combination of pandemic and socioeconomic drama.

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A realistic approach to the current and possible future developments is more than necessary due to the swift and dramatic changes that are taking place in the Euro-Atlantic space and in the individual member-states, particularly USA. Being a NATO member state does not bring privileges and relaxation but rather increased military spending, engagements and responsibilities in an insecure world. It goes without saying that any member state is expected to deal with its internal problems by itself, to be aware of the dynamic security balance in the immediate region (especially in the NATO borderlands, such as the Balkans) and to balance its participation in global affairs in accordance to its socio-economic and other abilities.

For far too many years, Macedonian society was lulled in a dream of NATO fairyland. Not only society, but also the state leadership has been conducting a rather autistic foreign policy. In the meantime, the world has changed dramatically: “the U.S. unipolar moment” is definitively gone, while an unsettled multipolar setting is on the rise. Furthermore, Macedonia still faces challenges for which NATO has no remedy.

NATO in the 21st Century: Losing Relevance

On the eve of Macedonia's joining the alliance, the general atmosphere in Brussels and other capitals was not what one would expect. Namely, NATO's 70th anniversary in early December 2019 took place in a rather gloomy atmosphere. Even prior to the event, the analysts had agreed that as much as the event was billed as NATO's 70th birthday, politics could have made the situation feel more like a funeral (*Defense News* 16 November 2019).

What is NATO good for? This is a question that gets asked a lot in the West, while Macedonian (political, security and intellectual) elites are still keeping the trend of its rather autistic worldview and uncritical stand towards anything that comes from the West. The run-up to the alliance's anniversary was accompanied by an outpouring of doubts about NATO's future and usefulness. On the *War on the Rocks* platform, the alliance was said to be both endangering American lives and overflowing with strategic liabilities as a result of expansion (Ruger, 2019; Cancian and Cancian, 2019). *The Wall Street Journal* (25 March 2019) asserted that the alliance was effectively deceased. Writing in *The National Review*, Douglas MacGregor (2019) found "dead" insufficient, instead declaring NATO to be a zombie, while Gil Barndollar (2019) merely called for the alliance to retire at 70. One of the most distinguished professors of international relations, MIT's Barry Posen beat everyone to the punch with his OpEd in *The New York Times* in March 2019 calling for a major reassessment of America's role in the alliance. He argued that President Trump has many bad ideas. Reconsidering America's role in NATO isn't one of them (Posen 2019).

No wonder the formal meeting in London, the Alliance's birth place, happened to be a total failure. Instead of confetti and festive disposition, the North Atlantic leaders exchanged sharp words and accusations. The U.S. President Trump blamed the European allies for being financially and militarily dependent on American protection and for not contributing enough. The French President Macron had already delivered a harsh verdict on NATO's "brain death" (*Economist*, 2019). The Turkish President Erdogan who had been running strange foreign affairs on his own (practically being involved in the military actions in Syria and beyond, while purchasing a

Russian air defense system), responded immediately: “I’m addressing Mr. Macron from Turkey and I will say it at Nato: you should check whether you are brain-dead first” (*Financial Times*, 29 November 2019). Also, leaks revealed that on the eve of a NATO summit Turkey had threatened to block a key defense plan to protect the Baltic states and Poland against Russian aggression unless NATO backed its own recognition of the Kurdish People’s Protection Units militia as terrorists (War on the Rocks, 19 November 2020).

The London summit’s end came as a relief for everyone. NATO came out with a joint declaration that laid out an apparently ambitious agenda: the international fight against terrorism, arms control, combating Russia, and, for the first time, the rise of China. Nobody could hide that NATO is not only facing emerging superpowers outside the alliance; it also has deep internal divisions and disputes that were on clear display. NATO Gen Sec Jens Stoltenberg tried to send a calming message by pointing out that differences among the heads of the alliance’s member states were nothing new, citing disputes over the Suez crisis of 1956 and more recently the war in Iraq.

The London Declaration emphasizes “solidarity, unity, and cohesion” as cornerstone principles of the Alliance. When it comes to the security agenda, it points out the following:

“We, as an Alliance, are facing distinct threats and challenges emanating from all strategic directions. Russia’s aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security; terrorism in all its forms and manifestations remains a persistent threat to us all. State and non-state actors challenge the rules-based international order. Instability beyond our borders is also contributing to irregular migration. We face cyber and hybrid threats.” (*London Declaration* 4 December 2019).

However, the applicability and the effectiveness of Article Five, i.e. the idea that if one NATO member is attacked all would come to its aid (the alliance’s deterrent effect) has been repeatedly questioned. In the already mentioned interview for *The Economist*, Macron put it bluntly: “I don’t know what Article Five will mean tomorrow.” In practice it is also very difficult to determine *if* and *when* Article Five is to be applied. As is well-known, the cornerstone of the founding treaty of the NATO alliance, Article 5, states that an attack on a member state is an attack on all its members. The clause, however, has been invoked only once: after the 9/11 terror attack on the U.S. At first, the Americans practically precluded Brussels’ offer and went

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into an individual crusade against Osama Bin Laden (the other motives were not hidden too). Later on NATO joined the expedition. In the case of Iraq, in 2003, the Americans did not even think of calling upon NATO and gathered an *ad hoc* “Coalition of the Willing” (*NY Times*, 28 March 2003). Macedonia was a part of it, even at the cost of violating its constitution and international law. Then to the shock of the youngest member, Montenegro, Trump bluntly defined the dilemma: “the NATO mutual defense compact is confusing, particularly the question of why an American would have to defend a small country like Montenegro, which is more than 5,000 miles away.” (*The New York Times*, 18 July 2018). As already mentioned, Turkey also asked for activation of Article Five on the eve of the London summit but did not get support because the issue of terrorist threat was defined differently by Erdogan and the others (primarily, France).

Posen argues that NATO’s founding mission (i.e. self-defense) has been achieved and replaced with unsuccessful misadventures. Furthermore, NATO helps make American military action abroad too easy. In other words, NATO may be seen as a legitimacy factor for the military interventions run by American national interests. NATO support helps sell an operation to American voters – Posen rightly concludes. As for the defense of the smaller and less powerful member-states, it remains questionable if the more powerful allies would be willing to fight for Lilliputian states such as Montenegro or Macedonia.

The ongoing NATO crisis has hardly been a secret for anyone. It is sufficient to see the tone of the leading Western media outlets’ headlines. For instance, even *The Washington Times* has come out with articles entitled “Trump is poisoning NATO. Why?”, “Trump is bent on wrecking NATO. Prepare for catastrophe”, etc. In a rather dramatic way Roberg Kagan (2018) concluded that:

“Any student of history knows that it is moments like this summit that set in motion chains of events that are difficult to stop. The democratic alliance that has been the bedrock of the American-led liberal world order is unraveling. At some point, and probably sooner than we expect, the global peace that that alliance and that order undergirded will unravel, too. Despite our human desire to hope for the best, things will not be okay. The world crisis is upon us.”

The Western analysts differ only with regard to the factors that produce the deepening crisis. Pessimistic views are present both with the analysts and researchers who think that the Alliance is *sine qua non* for preserving the liberal order and with those who argue that it is a source of raising authoritarianism and imperialism on a global scale. For instance, Magnus Petersson, a Professor at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, explores and sums up all the root causes of the crises, emphasizing that NATO is the world's important defender of Western civilization (2019). He detects the key reasons for NATO's current crisis in the reluctant behavior of the US (or more precisely, Trump) administration, Russia's revisionist stance and Europe's financial and political crisis. On the other hand, in the leftist corner there are views that the world is facing the disintegration of Euro-Atlanticism and that new authoritarianism is on the rise. For instance, two British professors (Fouskas and Gökay 2019, p. 41) argue that the global financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis have disintegrated the hub-and-spoke arrangements binding together Western Europe and North America under the umbrella of NATO. They conclude that power is flowing away from the USA and its Western allies to new emerging economies of the Global East and South, which affects the West's ability to sustain an effective, quasi-global hegemonic control.

It does not take much effort to get to a conclusion encapsulated in one sentence: NATO at 70 is in a deep existential crisis. Some analysts believe that crises are something that have accompanied the Alliance throughout its whole existence, and that it is not a reason for deep worry. According to them, NATO has proven its sustainability and endurance in various international contexts, so it is capable to deal with any future one too. The key conclusion is that NATO is here to stay, regardless of the changes in the international arena. This is how NATO's proponents explain the alliance's evolution and search for *raison d'être*:

“During its first phase, which lasted from its establishment until the end of the East-West conflict, NATO was an instrument of Western defence and self-determination against the Soviet Union. In the second phase – from 1989 to 2001 – NATO filled the power vacuum left by the bygone Warsaw Pact and supported the democratization of Eastern Europe. The third phase began with the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York and saw NATO evolving into a global security actor, fighting the Taliban thousands of kilometres away from Alliance territory.

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With Moscow's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, the fourth phase of Alliance history started. Since then, NATO is back in the "Article 5 World" – a security environment in which the commitments of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty need to be bolstered by a credible deterrence and defense posture" (Kamp 2020, p. 11-12).

Indeed, the Alliance was born at the beginning of the bipolar international order (or one could even say that NATO's birth marked the beginning of post Second World War order). It survived the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of bipolarism in international relations, after the decomposition of the Warsaw Pact, thanks to two immediate factors: Yugoslavia's violent dissolution and iron law of oligarchy. The Yugoslav turmoil (although partly induced from the wrong policy moves of NATO & EU member states and the failure of the European foreign policy) had brought a sense of purpose to NATO. As noted by LSE's professor Christine Chinkin (2000, p. 914), pursuant to SC Resolution 816, 31 March 1993 the Security Council authorized "Member States acting nationally or through regional organizations to enforce no-fly zones over Bosnia. NATO carried out this function".

Following the 'iron law' of institutional sociology (Weber, 1971), NATO, as any other institution subject to changes, had to accompany its political and ideological renewal with organizational changes (Fouskas, 2001). In a nutshell, it means that as a major organization (bureaucracy) NATO has been doing anything to prove itself useful and even indispensable in order to preserve its existence and regular financing. According to Robert Michels (1962, p. 356), whoever says organization, says oligarchy. The "iron law of oligarchy" states that all forms of organization, regardless of how democratic they may be at the start, will eventually and inevitably develop oligarchic tendencies, thus making true democracy practically and theoretically impossible, especially in large groups and complex organizations. In other words, power flows upward to the few, which makes democratic process very difficult in bureaucratic organizations. Posen (2019) seem to agree saying:

"organizations don't like going out of business, and NATO was a 'good brand,' making it useful for other projects. So NATO took on a new goal: banishing security competition from all of Europe and its periphery, and bringing liberal democracy to former

subjects of the Soviet empire. Instead of being re-evaluated, NATO got bigger.”

Francis Lee gives a more harsh diagnosis, calling NATO “a comatose body whose ‘mission’ seems to be little more than to preserve and expand itself” (2020).

NATO has never been about democracy but primarily about security, despite the claims of the thesis of liberal interventionism and liberal peace theory, according to which democracies do not fight each other, but they do fight non-democracies. It’s worth mentioning that NATO is not under democratic control of any elected representatives or citizens, which was demonstrated in 1999 when the alliance carried out the intervention against FR Yugoslavia despite the obvious lack of permission by the national legislatures, as required by national constitutions (in the U.S. notably). The key profiteers from NATO interventionism (on the territory of former Yugoslavia, but also in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya) is the military-industrial complex and geopolitical power centers in the West. As Arundathi Roy (2014) put it: “Do we need weapons to fight wars? Or do we need wars to create markets for weapons?” Hakan Wiberg (2001) theoretically and practically explained ‘war for war’s sake’ regarding the case of Afghanistan.

The very existence of NATO is based on the premise of an *enemy threat*. Once there is no a (real, perceived or fabricated) threat on the horizon, NATO will lose its *raison d’être*. Wallace Thies (2009), a reputable NATO scholar, argues that the “iron law of coalitions” (according to which, alliances are formed to resist enemies and do not outlast them) must be rethought because of NATO’s record-breaking performance over the past seven decades. Despite the efforts to present the alliance as a political and even value-based one, the military dimension remains essential. Paradoxically, NATO leaders and officials keep saying that this alliance is the mightiest one ever. Secretary General Stoltenberg has admitted that “we don’t see any imminent threat against any NATO ally” (NATO, 11 July 2018), while the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) recorded in its 2018 World Report that “Russia’s military spending in 2017 was 20 per cent lower than in 2016.” SIPRI’s 2019 World Report finds that US military spending grew by 5.3 per cent to \$732 billion. There were increases in military spending by China (5.1 per cent), India (6.8 per cent) and Russia (4.5 per cent). The Swedish peace researcher Jan Oberg (2019) rightly notes the following:

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“NATO’s main enemy is supposed to be Russia. It doesn’t matter that Russia’s military expenditures are about 6-7 % of NATO’s total expenditures (29 countries). It doesn’t matter that NATO’s technical quality is superior. It doesn’t matter that Russia’s military expenditures are falling year-by-year – decreased to US \$ 64 billion in 2018 from US \$ 66 billion in 2017. It doesn’t matter that Russia’s military expenditures averaged only US \$ 45 billion from 1992 until 2018. Only? Yes, NATO’s total budget is US \$ 1036 billion of which the US stands for 649.”

John Cherian (2020) reminds that NATO plans to increase its military budget to \$240 billion by 2024. The alliance has pledged more missile deployments in eastern Europe targeting Russia and increased surveillance on China. Already, NATO’s military budget is 20 times that of Russia’s and five times that of China’s. He concludes that “the military-industrial complex has the most to gain from the continuing existence of NATO, not ordinary people.”

Interestingly, more it prompts global and regional militarization, the more talk there is about “love, peace and NATO”. This is a phrase originally used by Timothy Garton Ash (2002) as he was reporting from Prague Summit in 2002. According to him, casual bundling up of love and peace with a military alliance well illustrated discussions on NATO —discussions that evoke not defense but human and humanitarian values, peace, freedom, and democracy. He concluded: “NATO has become a European peace movement. Imagine, that Europe is a place where wars don’t start. As John Lennon sang: ‘Imagine’”. In an excellent study Merje Kuus delineates the practices through which NATO was drained of its military content and elevated to the sphere of fundamental human values. In so doing, she illuminates the practices through which military force and military solutions are associated with moral good. These practices, as she concludes, are central to the militarization of social life today (2007). In a later article (2009), she defines this phenomenon as a normalization of military institutions through narratives of global cooperation - a phenomenon that she dubs cosmopolitan militarism. She analyzes how NATO uses globalist spatial imaginaries to frame military approaches to political problems as enlightened and good (as well as necessary). Kuus rightly concludes that NATO’s militarism works by promising cosmopolitan subjectivity. It produces a teleological narrative of a natural progression in which political actors

gradually transcend their national contexts and come to see NATO as well as themselves as promoters of cosmopolitan peace (2009, p. 559). In a nutshell, NATO's legitimation process echoes Orwellian 'logic'.

The self-narrative of NATO as a factor for spreading democracy in the former Eastern bloc fails to acknowledge that along with the alleged support for democratization, the engagement included NATO's military actions in the Bosnian war and the 1999 intervention against FR Yugoslavia over Kosovo (as well as the further involvement in peace-building and state-building there). While the NATO military engagement in Bosnia was within the norms of international law (*SHAPE* 1998), the latter was in a clear breach of the UN Charter and humanitarian law. Nevertheless, NATO went through the period with no clear enemy on the horizon, and even helped legitimize R2P (*Responsibility to Protect*) doctrine, despite the fact that the intervention in Libya was a blatant failure (Kuperman, 2013). Actually, NATO forces illegally undertook a regime-change operation in Libya and devastated that country in the process.

The 9/11 events fulfilled the gap and the new archetype enemy helped create the war against global terrorism agenda. It is a *de facto* war with no end both in spatial and temporal terms. NATO seems to have provided for itself an endless mission for 'out of area' operations. The excuse of fighting terrorism provides opportunities for interventionist geopolitical agenda anywhere in the world. Nevertheless, some findings prove that NATO plays, at best, a supportive role in U.S. efforts to combat terrorism. De Nevers (2007, p. 34) argues that

"Three factors help to explain NATO's minor role in combating terrorism: shifts in alignments and threat perceptions caused by systemic changes, the alliance's limited military capabilities, and the nature of the fight against terror itself. Over time the consequences of NATO's limited role could be severe. If NATO's strongest members do not seek to address their core security threats within the alliance, NATO may have difficulty sustaining its military value."

As the new enemy started looking too elusive and in some cases related to so-called home-grown terrorism (in the Western societies), which made it impossible for a military alliance to fight against by military means. At first sight it seems as if it would be impossible for NATO to face this new phenomenon, but it tried to adapt itself again. The Alliance that had built its

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countering strategy on taking the fight abroad, all at a sudden (i.e. after the terrorist attacks in Spain, Great Britain, France, etc.) had to create a “comprehensive approach” (as some NATO generals called it). But, the new question now reads: does the comprehensive approach may mean getting back on the home front (Page 2014, p. 1-2). For now it seems obvious that, among other things also because of the effects of the migration crisis, old democracies have difficult time handling internal challenges and occasionally succumb to the wave of Islamophobia. Hence instead of spreading ‘peace and security’ all over the world, they face the old dilemma: more liberty & democracy or more security?

Soon, the old traditional enemies re-appeared on the horizon: primarily Russia, and consequently China. By portraying these two raising (regional and economic) powers as ‘revisionist’ and dangerous, the Alliance and its members have gradually turned back to business as usual: i.e. to geopolitical rivalry! The security agenda seems quite flexible, including various aspects of security, such as energy security, cyber and hybrid security, fake news, law enforcement, etc. The covid-19 pandemic is most recent and least expected security challenge for the member-states and the Alliance as well. Yet, only detectable military threats might keep the Alliance in business as well as sustain the (mostly American) military-industrial complex that stands behind it.

If there is one constant throughout the years, it is that the US as a *sine qua non*: without USA, there is NATO. Or to put it in other words, NATO may exist as long as it serves the US national interests across the globe. According to Geoffrey L. Williams and Barkley J. Jones (2001, p. ix), during the air campaign *Operation Allied Force* in 1999,

“NATO nearly became a virtual alliance with the US providing 80 per cent of the firepower; its allies lacked reconnaissance and surveillance aircraft, precision-guided and long-range weapons and even bombs. Although Europe has nearly 2 million men and women under arms compared to America's 1.45 million, the European members of NATO could not have coped with the enforcement operation in Kosovo without crucial American intervention. This situation constitutes the crisis for NATO. If these defects are not removed, NATO will become a virtual alliance and political club that ceases to be a military alliance capable of defending the interests of its members and

increasingly incapable of power projection to the crisis spots beyond its territorial integrity.”

The post-1999 period witnessed increased militarization of the EU, which culminated with the idea of the creation of a European army. It looked as if the EU leaders got the point of Kagan’s argument that the US is from Mars, and Europe is from Venus (2003), so they rushed to deny Europe’s weakness. Interestingly, the USA has been listed among potential enemies to defend Europe from, at least from the perspective of European cyber security (as explained by Macron). The high (political and economic) costs involved as well as the difficulties imposed by the covid-19 pandemic have postponed realization of this project, but the tensions between the USA and Europe within NATO remain high. As already said, the imbalance in military expenditures and capabilities has been noted for a long time. Trump’s administration only sharpened the dispute, turning NATO into a military weapons fair and the American military support into racketeering and extortion (*Defense One*, 8 March 2019).

The so-called “2 per cent goal” of GDP speaks volumes about the depth of NATO’s current crisis of identity. However, few dare question and discern the philosophical and security nonsense behind this goal. As Oberg rightly argues, tying military expenditures to the economic performance of a country does not uphold any rational security analysis:

“The 2 per cent goal is an absurdity, an indicator of defence illiteracy. People who take it serious – in politics, media and academia – obviously have never read a basic book about theories and concepts in the field of defence and security. Or about how one makes a professional analysis of what threatens a country. If military expenditures are meant to secure a country’s future, do the threats that this country faces also vary according to its own GNP? Of course not! It is a bizarre assumption.”

NATO’s rationale is the defense industry (military-industrial complex’s) mantra: new threats emerge endlessly, we must arm more, we need new and better weapons and we must, therefore, increase military expenditure. There is practically no logical argument for such a claim, since all potential NATO adversaries are militarily inferior, while not all of the new security threats could be countered by military means. In addition, there is

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another logical fallacy in this claim: if NATO at 70 is the mightiest and most capable alliance that ever existed, then what has been its contribution to global peace and security so far? How is it possible that after 70 years there are no less but more security threats and enemies? How does it come about that China's economic growth or Africa's natural resources threaten anybody in the West? However, as long as NATO is an instrument of the US foreign and security policy, the Alliance's interests will be dependent of *what* the White House defines as American 'national interests' and *where*. Therefore, it's true that NATO does not have a mission. It's in a constant search of a mission or it upholds a mission written on paper and another flexible missions dependent on the state of affairs. Despite all cries for development of the most sophisticated weapons and military equipment, NATO remains old-fashioned (traditional) nuclear-based alliance, which insists on the right to first use. Ahead of the London summit Stoltenberg announced details of large increases in Allied defense spending (NATO, 29 November 2019):

"In 2019 defense spending across European Allies and Canada increased in real terms by 4.6 %, making this the fifth consecutive year of growth. He also revealed that by the end of 2020, those Allies will have invested \$130 billion more since 2016. Based on the latest estimates, the accumulated increase in defence spending by the end of 2024 will be \$400 billion. Mr. Stoltenberg said: "This is unprecedented progress and it is making NATO stronger."

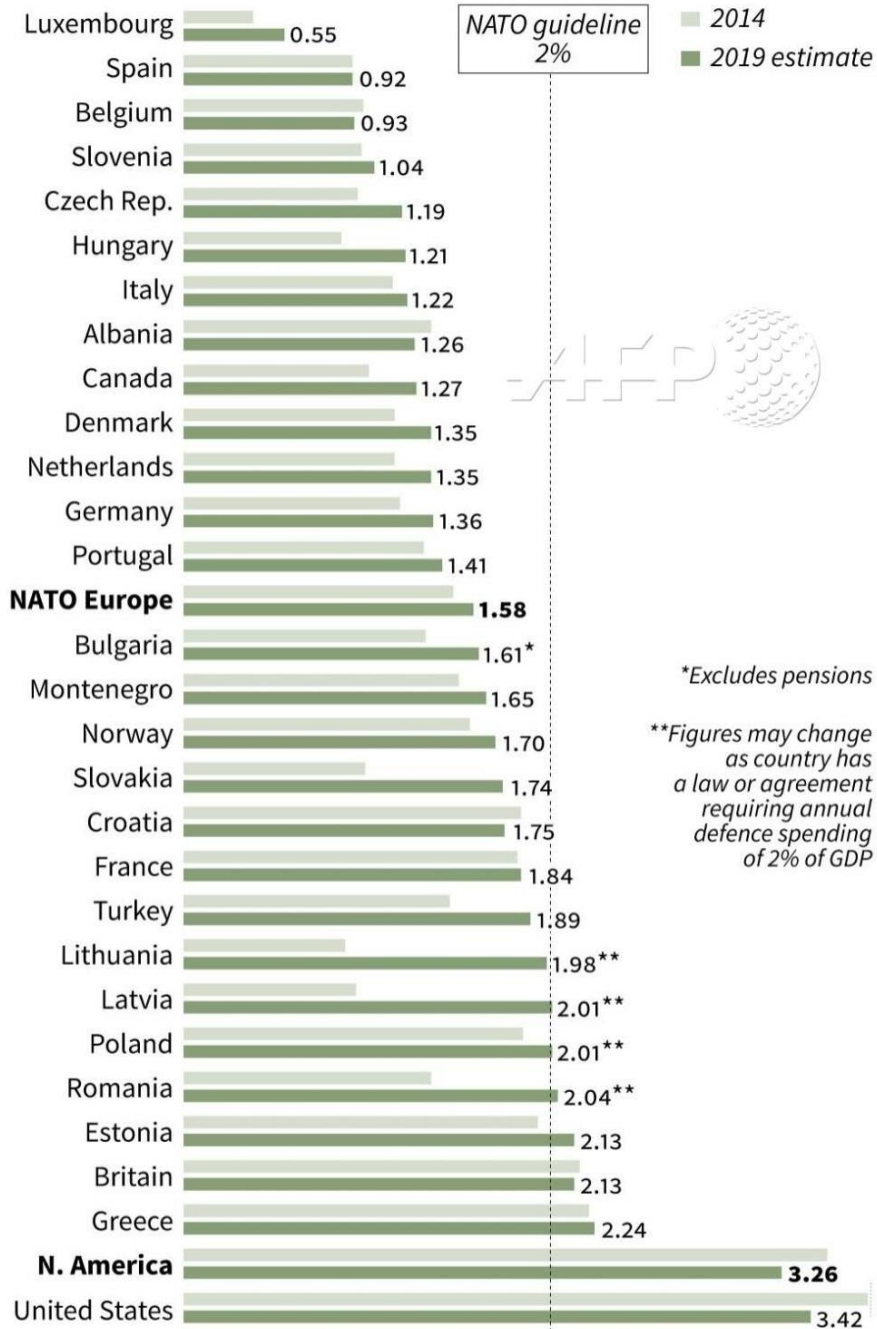
Overall NATO's military expenditure *increase* 2016-2020 reaches US \$ 130 billion, i.e. twice as much as Russia's total annual budget. The military expenditures of Russia – one country facing NATO's 29 – were 8 per cent of NATO. Also NATO countries spend more than 180 times more on the military than all the world does on the UN. It shows that world is so militarized that even the most democratic countries in the world are more prepared to spend money on military/security than in peace and development. With its global reach, "NATO looks ever more like a kind of United Nations in military uniform" (*Economist*, 2006). Yet one should keep in mind, too, that global militarization is now supported by an army of non-military structures used to legitimise military force. Accompanied by a number of NGOs and intellectual circles NATO tries to produce 'a particular normative space'.

Kuus rightly identifies the spaces and scales of militarization beyond nation-states, and in particular, demystifies the ways in which the process incorporates cosmopolitan and globalist imagery. The public relations campaigns of NATO and its affiliated NGOs, she argues, are indicative of the broader processes by which military institutions gain elite and popular legitimacy in liberal democracies (2009). Only with such a broad legitimacy basis the general public tolerate such an enormous waste of public funds for military purposes. The military-industrial complex is down to earth and works for profit only, so legitimization practices are good for business.

The most recent report on NATO military spending (*NATO Press Release*, 21 October 2020), displays a chart of insecurities and geopolitical interests *within* the alliance. It announced that military spending among the U.S.'s allies in Europe and Canada increased for the sixth consecutive year in 2020 as one-third of member states reached a key alliance benchmark (i.e. 2 percent of GDP). But Germany, which has been accused by Trump of not spending enough on defense, spent only 1.57% of GDP on its military. Stoltenberg joyfully announced that as many as ten NATO member states have joined the '2 percent club' and praised Trump for boasting the trend. But the in-depth look shows that in addition to the USA (the key contributor and financier of the Alliance), UK and France (great powers *per se*), and Greece (a bankrupt but militarily insecure state due to the conflict with Turkey), this small club has been joined by the Baltic states plus Poland, and Romania – all feeling insecure and with hostile attitude towards Russia (mostly due to historical reasons rather than any concrete ones). These are also the former members of the socialist block, who by default show greater allegiance towards Washington than towards Brussels. In addition to Germany, there are also a number of 'old Europe' members that argue that the budgetary priorities have changed due to the economic recession and health crisis so the 2 percent goal is unattainable and unrealistic (*Defense News*, 19 October 2020).

Military spending by NATO states

Spending as a % of real GDP, based on 2015 prices



The Second Cold War mantra is just a charade, just like the first one, which served as a fig leaf to cover the inter- and intra-imperial collusions of the great powers. The idea of a Second Cold War is a too limited explanation of a far more complex situation in which the power politics is not highlighted by ideological differences any longer. If it is true that the Cold War I had merely spread an ideological fig leaf over a far older contest, then Cold War II is nothing but misnomer to hide the power politics as usual. (Vankovska 2014). NATO (as an alliance or individually) has played a role in a number of military adventures for the sake of military-industrial complex and the US, such as regime change, military interventionism, 'soft power' in 'resolving conflicts', nation-building (Kosovo), state dismantling (Iraq, Syria), security energy competition, etc.

Covid-19 has imposed new challenges for the world but also for NATO. For instance, the Alliance was supposed to demonstrate its military superiority on European soil through the well-publicised military manoeuvres *Defender Europe 2020*. Ironically, the biggest war maneuvers that were expected to show muscle to Russia and the rest of the world were 'constrained' and reduced dramatically due to precautionary measures to combat an invisible enemy (coronavirus). The military as an organization is one of the best equipped social organizations, but ill-prepared for such a health crisis and disaster management. Peace researchers have been arguing that military budgets should be reduced and re-directed to civilian needs for a long time. Instead, NATO's eastward enlargement provoked Cold War mentality and fearmongering, and made its member states (even the poor and bankrupt ones) to invest in their military sectors.

The payday has arrived sooner than expected: the collapsing health systems and inadequate social services all over Europe, and particularly in the US, speak volumes. Not a single country in the world, regardless of its military or other power, is able to be a winner on a planet that faces trans-border, global challenges that threaten life itself. What does a 'military bloc' mean on a planet faced with a serious ecological crisis, climate change, the devastation of natural resources, and widespread health challenges? In this context, one should keep in mind one more possibility for appearance of the covid-19 pandemic: biological warfare experiments. Francis A. Boyle, the well-known US professor of international law and biological warfare, argues that "it is not the terrorist groups that are the problem here. It is the terrorist governments like the USA, China, Russia, UK, Israel etc. that have the most advanced biological warfare facilities and biological weapons in the world

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that threaten the very existence of all humanity as Covid-19 is now doing. (*IPS*, 20 November 2020).

Russia has served the purpose of being a traditional enemy for quite some time. No wonder many analysts have been speaking of a Second Cold War, primarily referring to NATO-Russia conflicting interests in European borderland. Since recently, however, the Western 'enemy front' has been expanded in order to include China. Furthermore, while the Europeans are cautious with regard to their socio-economic problems, rising populism, migration and energy security, the Americans (regardless of the president in the White House) are engaged in dangerous military games in Euroasia, Indo-Pacific and beyond. QUAD (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) was established in 2017 as an informal strategic forum between the USA, Japan, Australia and India, which has been now emerging as a political and military bloc that sees China as their common challenge. Pang Zhongying, an international relations Chinese expert, argues that "it is not a Nato yet, but it is a development that poses a serious challenge to China's security interests in the region." Obviously, as seen from Beijing, formalization of an alliance is closely linked to China's security policy (*South China Morning Star*, 7 October 2020). The Chinese response read that

"Pompeo has repeatedly fabricated lies about China and maliciously created political confrontation. We once again urge the US to abandon its Cold War mentality and ideological prejudice, stop unprovoked accusations and attacks against China and treat relations with China in a constructive manner".

Indeed, in a meeting with the foreign ministers of Japan, India and Australia in Tokyo in October 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo appealed for nations to counter what he called the Chinese Communist Party's "exploitation, corruption and coercion", signaling Washington's desire to strengthen the so-called Quad from a loose grouping into a Nato-like security alliance (*BBC*, 6 October 2020).

NATO is in disarray mostly because of the dramatic situation in the US. According to Jeremy Shapiro, the research director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, Trump is (or better, was) NATO's biggest problem (*European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2 December 2019). Many hope that a potential change in the White House would bring things 'back to normal', but there are many skeptics too. Actually, the problem lies in

getting back to normal: the Democrats in the White House have always been more belligerent than the Republicans. At the time of writing these lines, president-elect Joe Biden's first moves display worrying signs, especially in foreign and defense affairs. The selection of the candidates for a state and defense secretary represents "essentially a return to the *status quo ante*" i.e. of return to increased militarism (Zunes, 2020). The global media already speak of the return of American exceptionalism. In practice it would mean embracing "a more moralising, interventionist posture, which will be tougher on China, closer to Europe, and much more willing to make an argument for American values." (*Financial Times* 25 November 2020). The bottom-line is that "an eye-popping array of corporate consultants, war profiteers, and national security hawks have been appointed by President-elect Joe Biden" and that he is likely "to be pushed in an opposite direction, towards an interventionist foreign policy dictated by elite Beltway interests and consumed by Cold War fever" (*Greyzone* 14 November 2020).

Future global affairs and NATO's posture are going to be determined not only by the change on the White House but probably much more by the developments on the ground, which display an empire in a free fall. It may sound as an exaggeration but the indications of the fall of the US Empire and what would probably fall with it, such as NATO, is not a matter of 'if', but of 'when'. (Hanson 1993, Galtung 2009, Oberg 2017, Hedges 2018, Thomas 2020, Falk 2020).

When the leading power is busy managing internal (societal) strife, then Jens Stoltenberg has no other choice but to preserve the reputation of the alliance using PR-strategies. As far as an actual conflict is concerned, NATO (or better, the West) has demonstrated its resoluteness to remain as close as possible to Russia's border even if it means constant low-potential conflict and suffering for the local population, which is the case in eastern Ukraine for years now. Thus, a war by proxy is in place already although the mainstream media are not interested in following the developments in what looks like a permanent tension on the ground. What should concern us more is the new unrest on India-China border, as it may turn into a much more serious threat to global security given the indications that the USA sees China (rather than Russia) as a major threat to its global dominance.

NATO is in a crisis and the alliance is unprepared for new challenges from China and Russia, Harvard University's Belfer Center warned in February 2019 at the Munich Security Conference. The report authored by two former U.S. ambassadors (Douglas Lute and Nicholas Burns), identified

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Russia's military strength and China's economic and technological power as two major challenges NATO faces beyond its borders.

“Russia — NATO's largest, most military capable neighbor — remains NATO's principal external challenge,” the report claimed, accusing Moscow of ignoring international commitments, conducting provocative exercises and conducting cyberattacks against NATO members. The report underlined that China was not a direct military threat to most NATO allies, but it was emerging as “a global competitor” politically, economically and is seeking dominance in digital military technologies. “The European allies need to focus more intently on the challenge from Chinese economic and technological power and industrial espionage. NATO allies should thus tighten restrictions on Chinese investments in key technology sectors on both sides of the Atlantic.” (*Anadolu Agency*, 15 February 2019).

Re-deployment of 10.000 US troops from Germany to Poland and further towards the Black sea region (Romania and Bulgaria) speaks of the chess-game that is ongoing *within* the NATO family. Certainly, as seen from Moscow, it may look like a threatening move closer to Russia, particularly because of Poland's and Baltic states' official stand that they feel directly threatened from east. However, in the fall of 2020 Trump was busier at home than abroad, so few dare predict what he really could or could not do. In the run-up to the election, Biden already characterised Russia as an “opponent” and the state that poses the “biggest threat” to America's security. Some senior Western diplomats predict that US policy towards Russia will not only get tougher, but also more coherent (Hill 2020); Biden supports a strong NATO alliance, and will take early steps to repair relations with its European allies, especially Germany and France. According to Hill, this offers the prospect of a reinvigorated and more cohesive NATO alliance – politically and militarily. Biden favors strengthening NATO's capabilities to meet both traditional military and new hybrid security threats. To sum up, it means that under Biden, the US will continue to press its European NATO allies to pay more for their own defense.

On the London Summit in December 2019 Stoltenberg was asked to initiate a reflection process for the Alliance's future development. The group's report was published on 25 November 2020. A. Wess Mitchell, a

former U.S. assistant secretary of state for Europe, argued that “NATO is alive and kicking both in its cerebral function and its muscle tissue” and also that “NATO has to adapt itself for an era of strategic rivalry with Russia and China, for the return of a geopolitical competition that has a military dimension but also a political one.” (*NY Times*, 30 November 2020).

Whatever NATO self-perception and self-praise is, the objective overview of the world affairs show that at the end of the second decade of 21 century the world is less secure place than ever before. This is the exact moment in which a small and poor country, Macedonia, achieves a long-desired strategic goal in hope of finding not only a secure shelter but to gain other non-military benefits as well. While the country was trying to fulfil the membership criteria and to appease its neighbors, not only did NATO change but rather the entire world order moved in a different direction. The undefined and unfinished international order (often dubbed as bipolar-multipolar order) is quite dynamic and faces a number of shifting coalitions while global militarization remains a constant.

Multipolar Regional Puzzle: Balkan's Arms Race

The regional aspects of Macedonia's membership of NATO are as important as the global ones. Traditionally, military security of small states is seen as dependent on regional and geopolitical configurations. Despite all the talk about the decreased relevance of military security in general, one should keep in mind that the Balkans is still a tinder box, a potential flash point of frozen and unfinished conflicts, quite often dependent on the interests of the external actors. Most of it is due to the unsuccessful business of peacebuilding in the 1990s. Recently, there has been quite a dynamic change in power relations of the great powers in the region, including the old tactics of *divide et impera* and using the peripheral states as a small change in the global transactions.

At the onset of the 'Second Cold War' (i.e. after the annexation of Crimea) in February 2015 the US State Secretary John Kerry told the Senate's foreign affairs committee that 'Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Macedonia are the new front line between Russia and the West' (Dérens and L. Geslin, 2015). Ever since, and especially after the increase of China's economic influence, the region has become a multipolar microcosm, or one of the global fault-lines of colliding imperial interests. Having been on a front line has never been a particularly safe and pleasant position. However, the Macedonian authorities have been sticking to the official mantra about a safe haven in NATO and downplay all regional signals.

It is very likely that the recent intensified military buildup in the region is part of a broader tug-of-war for strategic advantage around the Mediterranean Sea. Blerim Reka (2019) guesses that it is likely that hybrid war and military competition divides the region into two security zones: one under the Russian umbrella (Serbia and Republika Srpska) and the second with the Euro-Atlantic aspirations (Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro). However, there have recently also been indications for a tug-of-war scenario over Kosovo during talks between EU and USA. (*EU Observer*, 8 September 2020).

The cessation of the military hostilities in the post-Yugoslav area - after the 1995 Dayton Agreement, the 1999 Kumanovo Agreement and the 2001 Ohrid agreement - has been accompanied by some attempts at demilitarization on a local level. However, they have never meant to

represent a 'farewell to arms' but rather catching up with the rest of the world's military developments, or preferably bringing the region closer to Western interests. Security sector reform has always been high on the agenda of all post-war/post-conflict societies in the region. But these attempts did not hamper, for instance, Bosnia and Herzegovina's ambitions to ask for NATO membership (which is very unlikely to succeed due to its internal divisions on literally every policy issue, including foreign and security policy ones) (*NATO*, 3 February 2020). However, the shadow of Cold War II is hanging over the country, as analysts compare the Bosnian frozen conflict with the Nagorno-Karabakh one. Karčić (2020) advocates a recipe for a 'peace' agenda in the following way: "The West needs to aggressively respond to this new Russian posture. A fast-tracked membership to NATO's security umbrella and greater Western involvement, both of a political and military nature, would spell stability for Bosnia and the entire region."

Instead of seeking for the root causes of the phenomenon, some analysts detect the problems of recent intensified re-militarization. They claim that after more than 20 years, countries in the region are starting to reverse the trend of (alleged) demilitarization. Sasa Kulenovic (2019, p. 3) believes that "regional instability and growing nationalistic agendas have been accompanied by the onset of a military build-up, ranging from increased military spending and weapons procurement programs to controversial moves that purport to re-establish armed forces in sensitive geopolitical settings". Blerim Reka (2019) agrees:

"Unresolved disputes in the Balkans will offer justification for governments to strengthen their armies and keep democratic institutions weak. Global military powerhouses are already getting involved: Serbia and Republika Srpska will receive Russian weapons and even bases. NATO also plans to build bases in the region."

Russia is indeed present in the region through its Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Niš that is regarded as potentially the opening wedge for a direct Russian military presence. The base is close to Serbia's borders with two NATO members – Bulgaria and Romania – as well as two NATO aspirants – Macedonia and Kosovo. Also one should keep in mind the military exercises and military procurement from both Moscow and Beijing. NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) has had a military base in Kosovo since 1999 and has begun building an air base in Kucova, Albania, just an hour's flight

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from Syria (*Economist*, 19 September 2019). The Balkans is becoming a strategic focal point of US security strategy. At the July 2018 summit, NATO concentrated on shoring up security from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and the Balkans, especially to counter Russia. In addition to the new NATO air base in Albania, the US works on making Bondsteel a permanent base. Such moves are in line with the *Three Seas Initiative* to create a zone of stability in between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic seas and to curb China's penetration by direct US support of the countries involved (*Deutsche Welle*, 18 October 2020).

Some analysts speak of the specter of an arms race in the Western Balkans. According to the report authored by Filip Ejdus (OSCE and IFHS Hamburg Policy Brief, 2020), in the last few years, the Western Balkans have engaged in increasing defense spending and rearmament, often accompanied by strong language about a looming arms race and military competition. The military rivalry has been induced by two key factors: NATO enlargement and unresolved mutual issues. It creates conditions for a 'perfect storm', or better 'perfect security dilemma' that benefits only the military-industrial complex of the rich and mighty countries, not the clients and citizens of the countries concerned.

'Interoperability' is euphemism that hides an ugly and irrational policy. Ever since the enlargement process took off, the new NATO members have been expected to be able to fly the same planes and use tanks as the existing NATO states, regardless of their economic capabilities and social priorities. That is, the new NATO states were told to throw out the old Soviet military hardware and buy the new, bright and shiny American military hardware. These were countries which were, and are now, in extremely difficult financial conditions. For instance, since 1996 Bruce Jackson (well-known to the Macedonian public as "our lobbyist for NATO membership") helped to found the 'US Committee on NATO'. He was also Vice President for Strategy and Planning at the Lockheed Martin Corporation, the world's largest manufacturer of military strike aircraft. Jackson was also President and Founder of the Project on Transitional Democracies which aimed at speeding up the 'reform' of the post 1989 democracies and bringing those countries into the 'institutions of the Euro-Atlantic' (meaning, NATO). Yet another post he held when he was Chair of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq (CLI).

As soon as the states of Central and Eastern Europe came into NATO, they had to be prepared to buy US planes and military hardware. However,

the initial shopping spree was not the end, but rather the beginning of a long-term process. For instance, Romania continues to increase its defense capabilities, and according to the Romanian MP George Scutaru, wants “to show determination in the process of increasing its own defense capabilities” and to contribute “to NATO’s effort to discourage Russian actions in the Black Sea region.” Indeed Romania signed a contract with Lockheed Martin to buy both the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System and the Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System for \$1.25 billion, making it the first European HIMARS customer. (*Defense News*, 5 August 2019). The procurement of new weapon systems has not stopped in Bulgaria too. Actually, it is partially a segment of the US plan for re-deployment of its troops from Germany to the Balkan allies’ territories (*Bulgarian Military*, 31 August 2020). The move has a military but also a symbolic significance: there will be a permanent military contingent of the US and its allies in places they have never been before. During a looming social and political crisis in the country, Bulgaria’s military expenses have risen (*SeeNews*, 26 August 2020). According to Prime Minister Borisov, the government allocated \$60.4 million to the defense ministry, to be used to set up infrastructure needed for multirole fighter aircraft takeoffs and landings. The government's decision followed the signing of a deal for the purchase of new F-16 Block 70 fighter jets manufactured by Lockheed Martin. Earlier in 2019, Lockheed Martin said that it could deliver the first jet fighter to Bulgaria by the end of 2022. In October 2020, US Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper and the Bulgarian Minister of Defense Krasimir Karakachanov signed a 10-year road map charting “defense cooperation between the two countries”. Esper praised the Balkan nation for dedicating 3 percent of its GDP toward defense in 2019. The road map looks for ways for the two countries to fix gaps in military capabilities and to improve interoperability, Esper said. He also said he wanted more NATO allies to reach at least the 2 percent goal of GDP committed to defense: “I encourage you and our other alliance members to pay to push for 2 percent of the GDP spending target and to make the needed investments to enhance your capabilities and capacity. Because you know, I believe that 2 percent should be a floor, not a ceiling.” (*DASA*, 6 October 2020).

The purchase of new weapon systems and the re-deployment of military force mean an increase of costs for the host-countries. Experiences from military bases elsewhere in Europe (and the world, when it comes to US military bases) shows a number of unintended negative consequences

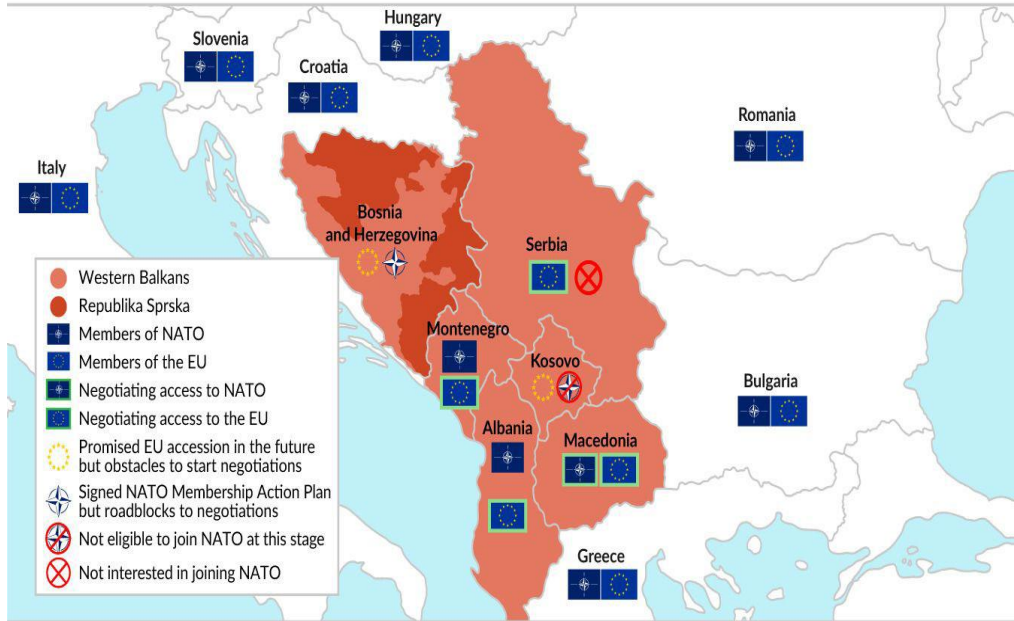
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for the local communities/populations. In addition to the increase of overall military costs for servicing the manpower and the weapon systems (i.e. spending for more weapons rather than for more butter), there are also a number of ecological issues as well as issues related to detriment of rule of law when it comes to foreign soldiers that are exempt from the local regulations.

The change of the global power balance and the rise of multipolarity has directly affected the military (in)security in the region. At one time, NATO membership meant joining a safe harbor in a security community, as defined by Karl Deutsch and others (1957) as a geographic and political region in which military violence becomes unthinkable or, in an early phase, at least very improbable (Adler and Barnett, 1999). Now as a number of states are joining the North-Atlantic alliance, it is obvious that the enlargement process worsens the situation on the ground and induces arms race and further militarization.

During the (first) Cold War period, southeastern Europe was strategically balanced through a 2+2+2 formula: two NATO members (Turkey and Greece), two Warsaw Pact states (Bulgaria and Romania) and two non-aligned countries (SFR Yugoslavia and Albania). The latest ones had different defense doctrines and policies, so while Yugoslavia was integrated within the Non-Alignment movement with almost all states from the so-called Third World, Albania was self-isolated and highly militarized totalitarian state. As of today, the balance has obviously swung in favor of NATO, with Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania, Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia all having joined NATO. Kosovo and 2/3 of Bosnia and Herzegovina also hope to join. With the Camp Bondsteel, one of the largest American military bases in Europe, Kosovo is *de facto* NATO member although it is not *de jure* one. Only Serbia and Republika Srpska are considered Russia's allies, despite the fact that Republika Srpska is no state entity at all, while Serbia is trying hard to balance its engagements with NATO, the EU, the US, Russia, and China. The current picture of the region (known as Western Balkans) is presented below.

NATO: closing the southern flank



Relations even among the current NATO members are variable and rather unpredictable. Each of them, including Turkey as a very important part of this puzzle, has its own agenda with regard to foreign and security policy priorities and goals. The growing conflict potential between Greece and Turkey is the most significant security threat that may affect all the other states, regardless of their (non)involvement in the core dispute, in the entire region and beyond.

The so-called crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean displays the decade-long *security dilemma* and existence of a *de facto* frozen conflict between these two NATO states. In fact, security dilemma is a concept that refers to a situation in which, under international anarchy, actions by a state intended to heighten its security, such as increasing its military strength, committing to use weapons or making alliances, can lead other states to respond with similar measures, producing increased tensions that create conflict, even when no side really desires it. According to Robert Jervis (1978), since the world is anarchic (i.e. there is no central authority), a state might, for defensive purposes, build its military capability. However, since

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states are not aware of each other's intentions, other states might interpret a defensive buildup as offensive; if so and if offensive action against the state that is only building its defenses is advantageous, the other states might prefer to take an aggressive stance, which will make the situation unstable. In such situation, an arms race may become a strong possibility. According to R. Craig Nation (1999, p. 281), "Athens and Ankara are arch rivals, whose mutual enmity often approaches the level of preoccupation. Rather than contributing to a resolution of the Mediterranean security dilemma, Greece and Turkey are its biggest progenitors." Others add that in the post-Cold War era, relations between Athens and Ankara have remained one of Europe's most dangerous flashpoints (Aydin and Ifantis 2002, p. 1). The ongoing tension and insecurity in one of the world's most intractable conflicts not only affects their bilateral relations, but inevitably produces deeper frictions within the Alliance (and EU). For instance, the USA and France overtly take the side of Greece, while Germany tries to mediate between them (merely concerned with the migration crisis effects on the EU in case Turkey abandons the deal on containing the migrants and refugees on its soil). The overview of the military spending of Turkey and Greece shows that the high costs are induced due to the regional security dilemma rather than the new NATO standards (2 percent goal). The frictions between Paris and Ankara have escalated to the degree of the withdrawal of the French Ambassador to Turkey in October 2020.

If one of the long-lasting mantras of NATO is that it represents a security community, the state of affairs challenges this narrative. The allies have common goals, but they have never abandoned their own national interests and aspirations even at the cost of NATO solidarity. For instance, on 5 October 2020, upon his visit to Ankara, Stoltenberg tweeted: "Good meeting with President @RTErdogan in Ankara today on a range of security issues. We discussed the military de-confliction mechanism developed @NATO for the #EastMed." (*Anadoly Agency*, 5 October 2020). He said he hoped the de-confliction mechanism recently reached between Ankara and Athens at NATO-hosted meetings could create space for diplomatic efforts. This conclusion, obviously, speaks volumes about the existing conflict potential and proves the thesis that NATO membership by default does not mean higher level of national security and lower defense costs. Since its inception, NATO has considered its southeastern front as its most pressing priority. But the Mediterranean is once again the site of geopolitical upheaval, i.e. it has turn into a powder keg (*Defense Post*, 2 October 2020).

Modern Greek-Bulgarian relations at first sight look quite good and stable. However, an insightful analysis shows that their friendship has been based on common interests (mostly on the ground of the thesis “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” when it comes to Turkey). Athens and Sofia share mutual wariness of Turkey (due to the substantial Turkish minority in Bulgaria and the deeply rooted Greek-Turkish tensions). Macedonia has been seen as a buffer state that absorbed the tensions of its neighbors and brought about excellent relations between, especially, Greece and Serbia. As Ioannis Michaletos (2006) notices, “while Greece placed an embargo on the government in Skopje over the name issue in the early 1990’s, and the Bulgarians hovered both protectively and predatorially in the wings, Greek investment poured in to Bulgaria.” Yet there is a hidden competition over the geopolitical control of the immediate region, especially concerning Macedonia and Serbia. The most immediate example refers to Macedonia. For instance, right upon the Prespa Agreement’s getting in force, the two countries competed over the defense/control of the Macedonian air space. Apparently, Greece won against Bulgaria’s and Turkey’s ambitions. In June 2020, Kathimerini’s commentator Tom Ellis concluded it was a fresh confirmation of Greece’s critical role in the Balkans, by stressing the following:

“Greek jets are monitoring North Macedonian airspace in a gesture that has the obvious symbolism, but also substance, as it aims to keep at bay the ambitions of other regional players to expand their influence into Greece’s northern neighbor. It should be noted here that Turkey and Bulgaria had both sought to undertake the task of policing North Macedonia’s airspace. Turkey had in fact linked the potential of policing the Skopje FIR with the setting up of a Turkish military base in the Balkan state. The Hellenic Air Force is meanwhile monitoring the airspace of two more Balkan states – Montenegro and Albania. Greece is thereby in a position to project its military might beyond its national borders, always in the context of collective decision-making and the consent of the countries involved in the scheme – and not through exerting any kind of pressure or promoting arbitrary claims.”

At the 2019 London summit, the Bulgarian President Radev stressed that protecting the Republic of North Macedonia’s airspace was Bulgaria’s

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national duty and responsibility. In his words Bulgaria should not miss the *historical opportunity* to protect Macedonia's airspace (*Novinite*, 4 December 2019). These words should be taken in the context of Bulgaria's claims over the Macedonian territory and people as something that belongs to it historically. Even nowadays, while Sofia is blocking the start of the EU accession talks with Skopje, the Bulgarian public is still grumbling over what is seen as a failure of their government to secure its privileged position in the Goodneighbourly Relations Agreement (signed in 2017, i.e. a year prior to the Prespa Agreement). One of the raised questions refers to allowing Greece to protect Macedonia's sky and to provide vaccines against covid-19. (*Mediapool*, 24 November 2020). However, as a way of making pressure on Skopje over national identity issues, Bulgaria has become the only country blocking the signing of an important border management agreement between Macedonia and the European border agency Frontex (*Euroactiv*, 22 October 2020). In May 2019, *Avionews* reported something important:

“While Sofia is waiting for its eight new F-16V Block 70 fighter planes that it has bought from the United States in anticipation of the full sum of 1.2 billion dollars, Athens has signed an agreement to control the Macedonian skies. The aircraft should be delivered in 2021.”

In other words, Bulgaria has indebted itself additionally in order to be able to join Greek military in protecting Macedonia's sky. To make things worse, trying to please all Balkan rivals and meet their (competing) demands, Prime Minister Zaev has repeatedly given contradictory signals. At first, right after the Prespa agreement came in force, he hailed Greece as a protector of the Macedonian skies. Now faced with the Bulgarian veto in EU, he said to the Bulgarian media that Sofia is going to protect the Macedonian skies (*BGNES*, 25 November 2020). Analyzing the rift between Sofia and Skopje within the EU, a Greek observer argues that Macedonia rejected Sofia's request to participate in NATO's air policing and also withdrew interest in Bulgaria's Belene Nuclear Power Plant, opting instead to support the natural gas project in Greece's northern port of Alexandroupoli (*Kathimerini*, 30 November 2020).

It seems as if Macedonia remains an apple of discord and potential tinder box as it was historically known, and the Macedonian government is sadly contributing actively this time with its inept diplomacy. As for NATO, it

obtains another fracture in NATO's southeastern flank along the Turkish-Greek one.

When it comes to other complex issues between Sofia and Athens, one should mention Greece's ties with Russia are traditionally good, while Bulgarian ones are far from stable – going from deep attachment during the Cold War period (when Sofia was the most loyal satellite to the USSR and the Warsaw Pact) to a love-hate relationship in the more recent period. The Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov has been trying to play different cards with Turkey, the USA and Russia (energy plans), but at the end of the day he remains loyal to the West (or more concretely, to Washington).

Belonging to the same military alliance has never prevented the nationalistic goals of certain member-states or different national interests. For instance, Greek-Albanian tensions are high due to the unresolved minority issues, occasional border incidents and maritime disputes in Ionian Sea. With respect to the latter, a US diplomatic cable from 2008 published by WikiLeaks in 2011 suggested that the Albanian chief negotiator had complained about the pressure created by Athens through its position as an EU member state to make Tirana accept an unfair deal by threatening to block Albania's European integration (*Balkan Insight*, 20 February 2018). Things get more complicated as the economic crisis deepens, while in the disputed waters between the two countries in the south part of the Ionian Sea, British and American companies have so far confirmed the discovery of at least three oil fields (Ramkaj, 2020). While Athens and Tirana are trying to resolve the problems, there is a level of distrust because of the close ties between Tirana and Ankara. Kosovo is also one of the open issues between the two countries, as Albania takes Kosovo's side and Greece Serbia's (Greece is one of the few EU countries that does not recognize Kosovo's independence).

On the other hand, Bulgaria uses any opportunity to 'prove' the (alleged) existence of Bulgarian ethnic minority both in Albania and Kosovo, while at the same time blackmails Macedonia's path to EU by imposing non-acceptable demands that are in violation of international law. The diagnosis of regional instability and growing nationalistic agendas accompanied by a military build-up does not apply only to the marginal/peripheral states of the so-called Western Balkans. Historical reunification projects and nationalistic rhetoric are not absent in the NATO area too. For instance, the Bulgarian Minister of Defense, Karakachanov said he might send a regiment to Macedonia to remove all the monuments that read "Bulgarian fascist

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occupier” (*Republika*, 20 October 2020). The Macedonian government, i.e. the weaker and dependent side in the dispute (over its language, identity and history) remained quiet. The Macedonian counterpart, Minister Shekerinska, indirectly responded during the oath-pledging ceremony of cadets at the Military Academy, saying

“The times when the defense ministers from our region could give such statements and be taken seriously are long gone. Bulgaria is a NATO member and so are we and this is not the appropriate way for members of the Alliance to be communicating with each other.” (*META*, 21 October 2020).

It may sound paradoxical, but NATO enlargement in the region only deepens and multiplies security dilemmas. Just like the one between Greece and Turkey, there are others, between Croatia and Serbia, and Serbia and Kosovo, which deserve particular attention. For instance, in late 2015, the media reported on Croatia’s alleged intention to acquire the M270 Multiple Launch Rocket System from the U.S., with the capacity to carry missiles with a range of up to 300 km. Serbia saw this as a threat and immediately considered purchasing the S-300 missile system from Russia. Even though none of these systems were procured in the end, both states have since stepped up their military modernization. According to the official reports, Croatia’s ongoing military modernization has been motivated by a desire to close the gap with the NATO guideline of spending at least 2 % of GDP on defense. Military modernization plans in Serbia, on the other hand, have been driven by its growing concerns about potential conflicts over Republika Srpska and northern Kosovo. The U.S. has threatened Serbia with sanctions over its decision to acquire the Russian *Pantsir-S1* air defense system. President Vučić justified the purchase by saying that Serbia would not become a “Bambi for slaughter” while Croatia and Albania are rearming (*European Western Balkans*, 10 January 2020). These developments have echoed across the region. Kosovo’s policymakers used Serbia’s rearmament as another justification for the transformation of the Kosovo Security Forces into the Kosovo Armed Forces. In response, Serbia called this “the most direct threat to peace and stability in the region” and has not ruled out military intervention if the new military is deployed in the Serb-populated north (*Guardian*, 14 December 2018).

Since joining NATO, Montenegro has also signed two major contracts for the purchase of helicopters and armored vehicles totaling € 66 million, Deutsche Welle reports. The first contingent arrives soon and Montenegro will be the first in Europe to have them in its military forces, and will buy them with a loan. The MoD officials argue that

“these light armored patrol vehicles represent a significant step forward in the modernization of the Montenegrin Army. With them, our ground forces will achieve the necessary deployment, maneuverability, mobility and protection capabilities, and thus the required level of compatibility with Allied countries in NATO and partner countries” (B-92, 2019).

However, not everyone is happy with the plans of the Montenegrin military. While NATO Typhoons take to the sky over Montenegro (*Defense News*, 5 June 2018), there is an ongoing battle on the ground for the environment and pasture-land. On 20 October 2020, Montenegro’s Defence Ministry postponed military training exercises for undefined period of time (‘until the conditions get right’), after a protest by activists and locals who claimed that that the explosives used would damage the environment (*Balkan Insight*, 2020). The resistance to the militarization of Sinjanevina, the second largest pastureland in Europe, has been going on for three years. The Defense Ministry argues that the military exercises would not harm the environment and the agricultural activities, and seeks support by the citizens because the military is “a security guarantor from external enemies and disasters, but also a strategic partner that would enhance the local infrastructure”. The locals and activists however claim that the military does not have any proof that the artillery shelling would not harm the environment. The law does not require any prior evaluation on environmental effects prior to any defense-related project. The military promises that the analysis would be made *post festum* (*Bilten*, 30 October 2020).

While the military expenditures of Western Balkan states as a percentage of their GDP decreased slightly between 2014 and 2018, in absolute terms they rose steadily due to GDP growth. In 2019, defense budgets soared across the region – 9.8 % in Albania, 14 % in Montenegro, 20.3 % in Croatia, 27.7 % in Macedonia, and 35 % in Serbia. All this has allowed these states to invest more in military modernization, although they all continue to fall short of the NATO guideline of spending at least 20 % of

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defense expenditures on equipment and/or 2 % of GDP on military expenditure. The analysts conclude that the military balance in the region has not been dramatically changed and it is within the international legal and political frameworks but few raise the question of the social and societal costs of such redistribution of public funds. The most legitimate question is if this Balkan arms race is going to bankrupt the respective societies (*Balkan Insight*, 2018). The economies of these countries had been struggling even prior to the covid-19 pandemic. Now it is even worse than before. Debtocracy (i.e. rule made possible thanks to loans and credits) has become a wide-spread phenomenon. Any government's 'patriotic' shopping frenzy is legitimized by a simple answer: "We need to modernize and we need the weapons." It may mean either distrust in the neighbors or obedience to power centers and the mighty military lobby, or both. However, some analysts point out one more possible explanation: defense procurement has always been a great opportunity for corruptive and secretive deals.

Talking about the regional context from the Macedonian perspective, one should keep in mind one more issue. Since 1991 and until recently, Macedonia used to belong to a region widely known as post-Yugoslav territory. Especially since 2003, however, this area has been intentionally re-defined and re-shaped to fit the political construct of the Western Balkans, at least for the purposes of the EU. It was meant to embrace the former Yugoslav republics minus the ones who joined the EU plus Albania – in order to dissociate them from the former political framework and to tie them to the European one. The neologism was coined at the 2003 EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki, where EU leaders expressed the commitment that these countries "will become an integral part of the EU, once they meet the established criteria". The geographical scope of the Western Balkans has been flexible, especially since Croatia's full integration. In the meantime, the term has been used so casually by foreigners and locals alike that it has long lost its quotation marks. In reality, it bears a meaning of a sanitary cordon, a dark place that calls for special treatment. The invention of a non-existent geographical region is not just a new terminology but rather a power relation.

Although the designation Western Balkans has been widely used in everyday political and public speech, there are also another regional re-configurations underway. Ever since the political, cultural, economic, security and geopolitical ties with former Yugoslav societies have dramatically altered, Macedonia has found itself in an apparently different

regional context. Its configuration resembles that of 100 years ago, i.e. the time of geopolitical and regional competition over the hearts of the Macedonians and their land. Reka (2016) agrees that history is back in the Balkans, but he sees 1989 as a point of reference for the claim that the region has become a dangerous place for living.

Due to its intentions to join NATO and the EU, Macedonia has become far more dependent on its immediate neighbors, such as Greece, Bulgaria and Albania, especially in its foreign policy endeavors. In other words, Macedonia's perspectives depend more on the regional state of affairs than the global one. Due to its vicinity but also to the traditional political, economic and military ties, Turkey's influence is not to be disregarded. Throughout the years, the nascent Kosovo state has also become a rather influential neighbor both in domestic and regional terms. The wider Balkan region has not come even an inch closer to the imagined 'security community' in the last decades. To the contrary! It may be easily involved in a major military disruption with root causes in the Middle East and Eurasia. With a series of frozen and/or latent conflicts on the ground, the region remains not only a risky ground for a great powers competitions but also for the reactivation of age-old conflicts. The overview of the NATO enlargement in the region shows that the effects are quite opposite to the official mantra about gaining more foreign direct investments, economic progress, environmental balance, social peace – and about allegedly indisputable military security.

Macedonia and NATO: A Love Story

The official narrative reads “Macedonia has always been unanimously pro-NATO” (i.e. pro-Western). NATO membership takes such a prominent position in the politicians’ speeches that quite often they argue that even the revolutionaries and freedom fighters from 19th and 20th centuries had been devoted to the values symbolized by the Alliance, i.e. that NATO membership is their dream come true (*Fokus*, 4 February 2020). Even the Government’s official website states the following: “NATO membership is our greatest state achievement. We have fulfilled the dream of the founders of the Macedonian independent state. We have become a part of the mightiest military and political alliance that the world has ever witnessed, as one among the equals” (*Vlada*, 2020). Any more sober analysis shows that the Macedonian public had not discussed any foreign and security policy option prior to the formal decision to seek NATO membership in 1993. In fact, quite quickly after gaining independence in 1991, and the overnight makeover into a *de facto* demilitarized state (due to the withdrawal of the Yugoslav army along with all weapons and military equipment in early 1992) (Vankovska and Wiberg, 2003), the Macedonian government expressed the country’s wish to join NATO and EU, just like all the other countries from the former socialist bloc. There was no time or democratic political culture for any deliberation, and the regional configurations were too complex to embark into a deeper consideration of the possible options. In due course, a narrative was constructed that NATO (as well as the EU) were/are the only things over which the divided society may/can reach a consensus and unite.

However, throughout the years there were oscillations in public opinion depending on the configurations in the region and country. For instance, the overall support for NATO membership dropped dramatically during the NATO intervention over neighboring Kosovo, the 2001 armed conflict, the 2004 referendum on municipalities’ borders, in the Bucharest summit aftermath, etc. On all these occasions, there was a clear line of disagreement between the Macedonians and the Albanians, i.e. the former believed that NATO (and particularly, the USA) was biased and took the side of the Albanians. For instance, a poll following the 2008 NATO summit showed that 82.5% of ethnic Macedonians opposed changing the constitutional name in order to join NATO - despite the fact that almost the

same percent of the total population (i.e. 85.2 %) supported country's pro-NATO course (*CRPM*, 2008). The survey report noticed that two-thirds of the respondents that would change the name of the country for Macedonia's NATO membership were ethnic Albanians.

Even after the failure in Bucharest, confidence in NATO among the Macedonians decreased among 30% of the surveyed, while the attitude of the ethnic Albanians was still quite uniform, as 96% of them have increased their level of confidence in NATO after the Summit. A couple of years later, a statewide 2010 survey displayed similar results: 80.02% of the population supported NATO membership but 65% of ethnic Macedonians still opposed a name change of the state as being the price for NATO membership (Klekovski, 2011). In 2016 the majority of Macedonian citizens considered the name dispute to be of great importance to be addressed immediately (54%) but by a great margin (65%) did not accept modification of the constitutional name for international use so that Macedonia could become a member of the EU and NATO (*IPRS*, 2016). This attitude and polarization remained unchanged for years. Actually, only a couple of years prior to the formal membership ceremony, the Macedonian public divided along ethnic lines: while a majority of the ethnic Macedonians favored preservation of the constitutional name (and thus boycotted the referendum on the Prespa agreement) to NATO, the attitude of the majority of ethnic Albanians was the opposite.

Macedonia's road to NATO has followed all the key developments in the international order and NATO's soul-searching efforts to find its new identity. Over a period of 27 years all the Macedonian governments believed that any effort or sacrifice was worthwhile and that the membership would come soon. For instance, Macedonia obeyed NATO requests to serve as a ground base for its troops during the 1999 air-campaign even if it meant removal of its own soldiers from the barracks. Due to the enormous refugee influx that put additional pressure on the impoverished country, the minister of foreign affairs pleaded for quick admission and believed the country's increased geopolitical significance would make the Alliance open the door. It did not happen, of course. The Macedonian government believed in the partnership with NATO even when the country was engulfed in an internal military conflict with the Albanian paramilitary (some of who were coming from Kosovo, i.e. the territory under NATO/KFOR governance).

Macedonia was among the first countries to sign a bilateral agreement with the USA for the exemption of US personnel/citizens from

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the International Criminal Court's jurisdiction even when it was against the EU guidance for the member-states and the aspiring countries. Dubbed bilateral immunity agreements (BIAs) by leading experts, these U.S. agreements state that current or former U.S. government officials, military and other personnel (regardless of whether or not they are nationals of the state concerned, i.e., foreign sub-contractors working for the U.S.) and U.S. nationals would not be transferred to the jurisdiction of the ICC (*Human Rights Watch*, 2003). *Amnesty International* (2003) urged Albania and Macedonia not to bow to US pressure and reject impunity agreements regarding the International Criminal Court, while the Macedonian Helsinki Committee launched a procedure before the Constitutional Court for violation of the Macedonian Constitution. Furthermore, Macedonia was among the first states to follow the US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq – in the latter case (the mission lasted until 2009) against the general policy of the EU (notably, France and other 'old democracies'). On 27 March 2003, *Washington Post* wrote:

“The United States welcomed the kingdom of Tonga yesterday as the 49th member of its ‘coalition of the willing’ for the war in Iraq, a club that includes many of the smaller of the 191 member states of the United Nations. The lit is shrouded in mystery, since there are other countries that have agreed to help but refuse to be publicly identified, usually because of domestic or regional opposition to the war.”

For years until the mission's end in 2014, Macedonia was among the top troop contributors in Afghanistan compared to the country's population ratio, well above the other full NATO member-states (including Greece). According to some authors, “compared with the NATO member countries, Macedonia's contribution was significantly larger than those NATO member countries that have a far larger population and more economic opportunities.” (Georgieva, Naumovski, Cvetkovska 2018). In 2011, the government still believed that it would earn NATO membership due to its military contribution to ISAF mission in Afghanistan (*Vlada*, 8 December 2011).

The outcome of the 2008 Bucharest summit appeared as the greatest shock both for the political elites and the general public. Macedonia was left

out due to the Greek veto. Ever since, enthusiasm for NATO has been going down because it became clear that the membership could be achieved only by paying an agonizingly high price. At that point, also the military budget and overall enthusiasm took a downward course. The minister of finance declared: if I had only known we would not become a NATO member soon, I would have not allowed redistribution of the budget for military means.

Having gone through as many as 18 cycles of NATO accession talks (MAPs) before it finally achieved its goal, which makes it one of the countries which has waited longest at the Alliance's door, in July 2018 Macedonia got an official invitation to start the association talks, i.e. right after the name deal (Prespa agreement) was signed between Skopje and Athens. However, its coming into force was still pending (the referendum, the constitutional revision and approval by the Greek parliament). In addition to certain euphoria on the side of the proponents for this alleged 'conflict resolution', many wondered how it was possible to reach an agreement at that point.

What had changed to make 'miracles happen', to paraphrase Foreign Minister Dimitrov? Two years later, on the second anniversary of the Prespa agreement, Dimitrov was still jubilant, saying:

"the words of the mediator Matthew Nimetz 'after Prespa Agreement no one can question Macedonians and Macedonian language in North Macedonia' are a proof that we had completed our mission... We chose the right path, which brought us NATO membership and start of EU negotiations in less than two years" (MIA, 17 June 2020).

Surely, it was a half-truth: EU negotiations never started, while questioning of Macedonians and Macedonian language is now done by the other Balkan neighbour, Bulgaria. In late 2020, after the Bulgarian veto in Brussels, it became clear that the NATO 'miracle' did not work for EU.

After removal of Nikola Gruevski from office and the installation of Zoran Zaev instead, the time was ripe for Macedonia to join the Alliance. Understandably, there was a geopolitical urgency for the act in the Balkan multipolar cosmos as seen from the West (Vankovska 2020). In other words, the cooperativeness of the previous periods and the achieved military reforms did not count as much as geopolitical constellations that provided for closure of the NATO puzzle in the Balkans (i.e. Serbia's vicinity and the pending 'final agreement' between Belgrade and Pristina over Kosovo, as Donald Trump hoped).

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The 'miracle' was achieved through a politics of blackmail that was hardly concealed. As is well-known, on the referendum about the Prespa Agreement only 36 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot, falling well short of the required 50 percent participation needed in order to make it binding. Indeed, the State's electoral commission officially invalidated the referendum result. The genuine collective action undertaken by the Macedonian citizens against what had been seen as imposed and unfair deal, was downplayed and manipulated by the Western centers, media and think tanks, as a proof of alleged Russia's meddling. For instance, in a research report for the US Congress the author argues the following:

Pro-boycott narratives were spread through social media. Intelligence officials in North Macedonia and the West reportedly attributed online disinformation campaigns to pro-Russia groups. A U.S. diplomat described the campaign as "an extraordinarily complex, organized, and toxic amount of disinformation." In September, then-U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis echoed these concerns during a visit to Skopje. Russia continues to challenge the legitimacy of the Prespa Agreement and push the narrative that the West "forced" North Macedonia into NATO. (Garding 2019, ctp. 10)

Just days after the unsuccessful referendum, Stoltenberg explicitly put it: "Either you are going to accept the deal over the name with Greece and implement it or you are going to reject it and remain out of NATO and *will not become an equal member of the international community.*" (360 stepeni, 2 October 2018). Instead of the expected well-deserved award for the democratization and military transformation (i.e. metamorphosis of Macedonia into a security provider instead of a security consumer, as it is usually said), the NATO association process took place within a rather 'schizophrenic' atmosphere of self-congratulation and fearmongering. The Prespa agreement became a security issue on its own. In the words of Defense Minister Sekerinska, "to question the Prespa Agreement that has been signed between the two neighbors under the strong presence and support of the international community, here in the Balkans, equals setting fire to a powder keg." (*Ministerstvo*, 23 January 2020). In a wider context, even the academic community had been arguing that without NATO (and whatever it took to get there), Macedonia would be under existential threat.

For instance, some scholars mentioned “Ukrainian scenario” (Caminski and Taneski, 2015).

The West’s moment of urgency was accompanied by Zaev’s government claims that were to strengthen the case for NATO at any cost: 1) the country’s security and its very existence were at stake, and 2) that it was the last opportunity for Macedonia to join NATO and the EU and thus secure the wellbeing the people want. This thesis combining (exaggerated) geopolitical (in)security imperatives (or rather, fear-mongering and Russophobia) and the prosperity and wellbeing of a poor country is quite in the spirit of Orwellian doublethink. The Macedonian IR experts have amalgamated *real-politik* with neoliberal ideals. Yet, Tucidides’ dictum ‘the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must’ have always been dominant when big decisions were to be made (Maleski 2018). Ex-foreign minister, and IR professor, Denko Maleski argues that the ‘Macedonian question’ and the Balkans are in the centre of world politics due to the big tectonic shifts in the relations between Russia and the West. More precisely, ‘the name deal has become an urgent question for the *national security of the US and the Western Allies*’ (Maleski 2019, p. 13). In other words, the national interests of great powers have been presented as essential for national policy-making in Macedonia.

Furthermore, NATO has always been more than just one strategic goal: the idea has always been to present the membership status as a proof for one’s civilizational (Western) orientation. Not only have the critics been disregarded and even reprimanded as ‘state enemies’ but school children have been raised in a rather militaristic way. Years before the NATO membership came true, there were NGO projects that targeted children population under the slogan “NATO, NATO, you are our gold” (the Macedonian version has a better rhyme “NATO, NATO, ti si nase zlato”). If in the former socialist system the ideology argued that the defense of your homeland is worth giving one’s life, now NATO is considered an ultimate value (gold, both in symbolic and literal term). On the occasion of NATO’s 70th birthday, the Military Academy and MoD issued a call for essays for pupils in the secondary schools entitled “NATO and I”, which implied a personalization of the attachment between a military alliance and the individual (*Ministerstvo za odbrana i Voena akademija*, 5 March 2019). The competition was administered through the school system and Minister Sekerinska had announced on her FB page that the deadline had been approaching. The prize was a visit to NATO HQ in Brussels. Obviously,

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Macedonia has followed the pattern of the other Eastern European countries in this respect.

The process of indoctrination of pupils from elementary and high schools continues even after the formal membership of NATO was completed. Interestingly, this campaign is supported by university professors (in sociology and pedagogy) who in the context of the “Civic education curriculum” try to downplay the elements of NATO as a military alliance in favour of its political dimension, including fabrication of facts. The goal is the formation of future citizens with undeniable pro-Western orientation. Thus, a forum of experts was held on 21 December 2020 under the title “Euroatlantic values and societal challenges through the prism of the educational process”. Among other participants, the professor from the Faculty of Philosophy, Tatjana Stojanova-Ivanova (who also serves as the prime minister’s special advisor for education) argued that it is necessary to be shown through the school curricula

“... which the true, universal values are and what the achievements for the Republic of North Macedonia are from NATO membership, but also an EU candidate country. In the mass-media there is an obvious lack of discussions about what NATO means – i.e. that they are not aggressors, and that they contribute to strengthening peace and security in a country. These issues we implement within the themes included in civic education in the eighth and ninth grade, and then in the high school they are further discussed in order to help young people to overcome stereotypes.” (*360 степени*, 21 December 2020)

To sum up, the participants of this debate believe that education about the Alliance will contribute to the elimination of the negative attitudes towards NATO and misinformation from the media. This is an interesting proposition, since in the media de facto there are no negative attitudes whatsoever, let alone any critical ones. The true goal is something else and consists of indoctrination of children from their early school years, something that is hardly possible to find even in the old NATO states. It is slightly odd that this debate was held just one day prior to 22 December, i.e. the Day of the Yugoslav People’s Army in former Yugoslavia. It seems there is a weird continuity when it comes to the glorification of the military as an institution, with one difference: in the this case it is not related to one’s national institution (and symbol of the fight for national liberation) but to an

alliance that in its record has proof of overt breaches of international law and whose members have been involved occasionally in committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. In her study of Eastern enlargement of NATO practices, Kuus (2009, p. 554-555) have already noted that

the official soundbites are only a small part of the process. Global NATO is not simply evoked rhetorically in speeches and documents; it is also enacted materially through educational and entertainment events. Most of the day-to-day production of NATO's normative space takes place in civil society, coordinated by NGOs. These NGOs, titled as Atlantic or Euroatlantic organisations, associations, or clubs of their countries, form a kind of a transnational archipelago in which contacts, ideas, and money flow freely... The membership of such NGOs includes elected politicians and career bureaucrats as well as academics, businesspeople, various public figures, and students... Certain types of events like conferences on 'new NATO', essay-writing competitions, simulation games for high-school students, or drawing competitions for smaller schoolchildren, occur over and over again in different countries, sometimes simultaneously or in short intervals... NATO's publicity campaigns pay particular attention to children and youth, from first graders to university students. This is not simply a matter of smiling children posing with military personnel on publicity photos. It is more involved than that. Young people are shown to actively participate in NATO's activities: to draw pictures, to attend rallies, and to seek out information about NATO. I highlight that aspect of NATO's public relations machinery here because it is most explicitly performative and enactive: children literally draw, write, and simulate the brave new world of an enlarged NATO.

A few generations of youngsters have grown up with a belief that NATO means peace and prosperity. The idea was installed by the school system, media and NGOs. Interestingly, the first political party with a clear anti-NATO position emerged only in 2015 – the far-left party Levica declared in its political program that it would advocate and work against Macedonia's joining the alliance. The activists of this party (a rather young and well-educated people) have been the only ones who overtly protested against the US army units entering the capital Skopje and six other cities on their

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way to the military base Krivolak in central Macedonia. In July 2017 a Macedonian media's headlines read: "American military has entered Macedonia". The report said that "a number of activities were envisaged between the members of the American and Macedonian armies with the population in six cities in the country. On the city squares in Kumanovo, Skopje, Stip, Veles, Struga and Strumica the militarymen will display the military equipment, there will be fitness sessions and children's competitions and games" (SDK, 28 July 2017). During the exhibition on the Skopje city square, a few members of Levica tried to peacefully protest by displaying a banner "No to War for Profit", but the police arrested them for alleged hate speech (Glasnik, 29 July 2017).

Reality Check: Gains and Losses

Now as Macedonia is a NATO member-state, despite the relatively short experience of the novel status, let's make a reality check between the expectations and the real cost-benefit balance.

1) Acknowledged international recognition and ultimate belonging to the Western club: Bearing in mind the long and troublesome path to international recognition of the independent Macedonian state, it is not strange that there was a need for an international sponsor and protector. Thus NATO was pictured as a safe haven. Prime Minister Zaev usually refers to NATO membership as to a property attestation document for the Macedonian state, and even for Macedonian identity. NATO supposedly represents the definite possible military security guarantee for the Lilliputian state, especially vis-à-vis its neighbours (in light of the so-called Macedonian Question). In reality, however, Macedonia's path to NATO looked like a self-fulfilling prophecy. No international organization is eternal and/or able to guarantee any state's existence, especially in case of its implosion. In the current international system, it is the UN that is supposed to be the ultimate guarantor of international peace and security. Furthermore, NATO is in such a deep crisis that even some world leaders (such as Macron and Trump) question its effectiveness and applicability of Article 5, especially to small states. Some analysts have criticized NATO for becoming an alliance that does not fight, i.e. its military potential has a symbolic weight and plays a

deterrent role but key NATO interests are usually achieved with no readiness to fight and die for one another. Gil Barndollar puts it this way:

“The American people, whose sons and daughters are already pledged to defend 27 European nations an ocean away, deserve an explanation for why their country remains the anchor and the banker of an alliance that can’t fight. We are long overdue for a blunt and sober assessment of NATO. Macedonia’s accession into the alliance should prompt reflection, not cheering.” (*Defense News*, 13 February 2019).

According to Sekerinska, the key accomplishment that derives from NATO membership is the newly gained influence on the decision-making process in the alliance and improvement of the image of the state as a responsible actor:

“We are going to have the same right to support or even to block certain decisions. The key advantage is the influence that we are going to get during the decision-making process, so the serious and very influential countries are going to look at us as someone who is at the table, who makes decisions” (*Ministerstvo*, 27 February 2020).

Furthermore, she thinks that this is how Macedonia is going to be seen as a future partner in the European context, as NATO membership gives a powerful EU following wind. Indeed a chair at the NATO decision-making table has been one of the most important reasons for joining, especially among the small states and former socialist ones who hope to make their voice heard in European politics through full integration into both NATO and the EU. The experience of countries like Denmark, Norway, Hungary and Czech Republic, prove the thesis to some degree (Honkanen, 2002). But for a small state to have influence, the sole membership status is not enough. First of all, any state should have clear national security strategy, self-awareness for its own national interests but also of its relative weight in the internal NATO bargaining process, and competent diplomacy.

At the time when Macedonia is blackmailed over its identity and faced a new veto in the EU (now from Bulgaria, which threatens to block accession process for as long as it takes), obviously the state is not at the table but on the table, unable to even make any sovereign decision even in

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its internal affairs (let's not forget that the constitutional sovereignty was already sacrificed for the sake of the Prespa Agreement, i.e. for the NATO membership). It's hardly a secret that in NATO all are equal, but some are more equal than others (*National Defense*, 2014). The paradox here is in the fact that in order to gain NATO membership, Macedonia had to give up the crucial elements of its international legal standing and sovereignty (*de facto* giving up its sovereignty, name, language, culture and history for the sake of a military alliance). Another absurdity is that Macedonia has been disputed precisely by some NATO states, its neighbors, while NATO officials usually sent the message: please do resolve your mutual disputes without any involvement of the alliance. (The same applies to the EU.) It was the case with the verdict of the 2011 UN's International Court of Justice against Greece, which played no role whatsoever in terms of the Greek policy of blackmail. As soon as the ICJ issued its decision, NATO reacted to the Judgment, its Secretary-General tersely noting that "the ruling does not affect the decision taken by NATO Allies at the Bucharest summit in 2008" (*NATO*, 19 December 2011). Albania also had some ideas about imposing requirements over the implementation of the Ohrid agreement but it was too weak to put real pressure (*IBNA*, 20 May 2015). Currently the same is the case with Bulgaria, although in the EU context. The fact that Bulgaria did not have any objections over Macedonia's membership of NATO speaks of the geopolitical reasons behind the decision (which are not a part of this study). Obviously, the Macedonian Question is not only still open but it has been revamped. Its negative effects for the region and internal political and ethnic groupings in Macedonia are more than obvious. NATO membership has not changed the old rivalries over Macedonia. As for the 'belonging to the West' is a rather abstract matter, especially having in mind the disastrous state of affairs at home with regard to human rights, democracy, rule of law, tolerance, etc. The other part of the story relates to the deep crisis of capitalism and Western democracy at its core. The politics of double standards used by the West echoes an old popular saying "don't watch what I am doing, do what I am telling you to do".

2) Regional peace and stability was also envisaged as an important gain from the NATO membership. Even if it might have been relevant during the years of Yugoslav wars and conflicts in the 1990s, now the new multipolar setting imposes different dynamics. On one hand, by getting closer to NATO, Macedonia has been enforced to take sides in other neighbors' disputes,

notably in that of Serbia/Kosovo. That the Balkan specter of unresolved (identity) conflicts is still alive could be illustrated by Zaev's words:

"We never knew who has designs on us, who wants to partition us. Now Article 5 says that if one NATO member state is attacked, all 30 member states are attacked." (*Repubika*, 25 June 2020).

Sadly, deeply involved in their maritime war games, Greece and Turkey would not agree with this position. As already is mentioned, the agreement between Skopje and Athens entrusted control of the Macedonian sky to the Greek Air Forces, which immediately boosted former Prime Minister Tsipras' standing at home as he was now in a position to tell his fellow-countrymen that, thanks to the deal, Greece rather than Turkey now controls this part of the region. According to *Kathimerini* (4 April 2019), "the military dimension of the relationship between Athens and Skopje will put Greece on a par with Bulgaria and Turkey in the region, to the chagrin of Ankara and Sofia, which have long-established close military ties with North Macedonia".

Indeed, Turkey had been a leading military supporter of the Macedonian state since 1991, in addition to the US. A clear sign of Turkey's growing concern over Athens's new role in Macedonia after the ratification of the Prespa agreement was the visit to Skopje of its defense minister, accompanied by a large delegation, just one day after Tsipras was there. Hulusi Akar pledged that his country was prepared to help modernize the country's army. Such a dynamic and the rhetoric used on that occasion illustrate intra-NATO collusions and distrust.

The turbulence in the eastern Mediterranean (and especially the erratic and at times renegade behavior of Turkey within NATO, motivated by its own national interests and regional geopolitical ambitions) has its obvious echo in the Western Balkans. Having been at a crossroad of a few regional configurations, Macedonia is in a vulnerable position whether the threats come from the Eastern Mediterranean or the triangles Belgrade-Pristina-Sarajevo/Pale and Belgrade-Sofia-Athens. More importantly, the rivalries over Macedonian identity and belonging (and 'true' origin) are still thriving. Not to mention the other unresolved and frozen conflict in the region, they all give a picture of a rather unstable region.

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But NATO obligations require taking sides. In November 2020 Macedonia witnessed its first mission as a full NATO member: it sent 44 military officers to KFOR. Prime Minister Zaev boasted “our Army is an equal member and a part of the mightiest military-security alliance in the world” (*Vlada*, 17 October 2020). The media had already echoed as soon as the decision had been made: “Macedonian Army is entering Kosovo” (*360 stepeni*, 28 July 2020). This mission is the most numerous one at the time being and according to official sources it will only increase rather than decrease. Logically, it would mean that there are no expectations that Kosovo would not need any military mission any time soon. It puts Macedonia on the line between Belgrade and Pristina, whatever happens in the future. It is hardly a disinterested party in this peacekeeping mission not only due to the ex-YU legacies, but also because of those from 2001 up to the Kumanovo developments in 2015 and ongoing negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina. These have a possible strong impact on Macedonia’s security. One of the latest incidents that tested Macedonia’s viability is the one widely known as the “Kumanovo case” or “Divo Naselje case” (from the name of the neighbourhood where it took place), from 9-10 May 2015. An armed group of ethnic Albanians, mainly from Kosovo, killed 8 and wounded over 40 police officers. Ilcho Cvetanoski (2017) noted

“the cleavage in the public’s view of the incident remains. For some, Kumanovo was a clear case of terrorist attack; for others, the perpetrators were just puppets in the hands of more powerful elites who tricked them into doing what they did. According to an extreme nationalist narrative, coming mainly from Kosovo and supported by marginal groups in Macedonia and Albania, the defendants are national heroes fighting for the liberation of ethnic Albanians in Kumanovo.”

Oddly, one of the organizer’s nickname was Commandant NATO (Mirsad Ndrecaj was killed in the police action). During a meeting of the National Security Council after the act the then president Ivanov stated that lack of EU and NATO integration was to blame for conflict. He also argued that he had informed representatives of 17 EU and NATO states earlier that year of the activities of the armed group that later carried out the attack in Kumanovo (*Novinite*, 11 May 2015), but that this communication “did not yield much results” at the time (*B92*, 11 May 2015). The event took place

amidst the deepest political crisis in Macedonia's political history, and the interpretations reached different heights ranging from crime fiction to conspiracy theories. Even at that moment the Macedonian establishment urged the EU and NATO to "find a way to unblock the Euro-Atlantic integration for the sake of both Macedonia and the entire region" (24 *France*, 10 May 2015).

In the aftermath of the 2016 elections (that followed the Colorful revolution of 2015/16) the so-called Tirana Platform was agreed by the three ethnic Albanian parties in Macedonia under the auspices of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama in Tirana and later signed in Skopje. It sought, among other things, to give Albanian the status of an official language. In a letter addressed to Stoltenberg, president Ivanov warned: "The platform is a post-elections document, adopted in another country, in a cabinet of a foreign statesman and with the mediation of a Prime Minister of a foreign country" (*Euroactiv*, 8 March 2017). Reportedly, the Platform was drafted in the cabinet of Albanian Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati with the approval of Rama and was also discussed in Prishtina. NATO could not care less, as at that point removal of Nikola Gruevski from office was a top priority, while the Albanians had enough leverage in domestic politics to make them king-makers of any government. The bottomline, however, is that NATO and EU power corners are deeply aware of the region's volatility and accumulated militancy behind the surface. If these symptoms and problems have not already been healed it is quite improbable that Macedonia's NATO membership will have any effect on the elimination of the root causes, especially when a part of them is deeply embedded in Macedonian society and in the triangle Tetovo/Tirana/Prishtina. In 1990s Hakan Wiberg (1993, p. 107) was writing about the southern interlocking conflict triangle within ex-Yugoslavia, consisting of Serbs-Macedonians-Albanians. It appears that in the 21st century the number of potentially volatile ethnic triangles has multiplied but the Macedonians are now in the middle of each.

3) *Military security assurances*: The Macedonian state elites have been arguing that belonging to the "mightiest military alliance in human history" is the key goal for the small state that needs powerful protectors in the world of international anarchy and self-help. But the external military enemy has never been clearly defined from the point of view of Macedonia's national security, while the defense policy documents also contain rather vague ideas about the military threats. After all, who would intend to militarily endanger

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a Lilliputian state with practically no military defense capabilities when it could be easily subdued through other means? This has been proved recently by the unscrupulous identity demands by Athens and Sofia.

Usually, it is believed that the vital (essential) interests of a nation state are related to its existence – i.e. its identity in the international arena as a distinctive state entity. Thanks to the submissive stance of the Macedonian leadership, the state has capitulated on the issues that other states would hardly ever trade-off for elusive gains. As already noted, one could decipher implicitly in the speeches of the politicians that the main security threats (imagined or real) are still related to the neighboring area. The messages of the defense minister Karakachanov give a sense of realism to these projections. Interestingly, the Macedonian politicians seem to believe that NATO could defend one member-state from another, which is clearly hollow wishful thinking and ignorance about functioning of the Alliance.

As for the other non-NATO states, as said before, Macedonia finds itself in a rather uninviting position on the new geopolitical fault line of colliding economic, political and military interests (Mankoff 2017). Macedonia's geopolitical crossroads, as seen from the Atlantic community, were described by the president of Atlantic Treaty Association President Fabrizio W. Lucioli at the NATO Day in Skopje who argued that “the free democracies of the Euro-Atlantic community are surrounded by threats and instabilities originating not only from the East, but also from the South”. He mentioned the following reasons why Macedonia should join NATO as soon as possible:

“1) Approaching the seventy anniversary of the Atlantic Alliance, a full membership of Skopje will restate NATO's Open Door Policy bringing new energy to the Atlantic Alliance; 2) The migration crisis is challenging not only the Macedonian borders as the stability of the country appears essential for the EU – Turkey deal on migrants. 3) Furthermore, the full implementation of the Euro-Atlantic integration process will discourage any “greater” strategic perspective or influence, eventually envisaged by neighboring countries. 4) NATO's enlargement to Skopje will better counter the increasing Russian influence in the region, which is not favoring an economic and social development of the Western Balkans through their full Euro-Atlantic integration. 5) Finally, Skopje is

at the end of the One Belt One Road commercial and strategic highway coming from China.” (ATA, 15 April 2018)

In addition to the participation in US and/or NATO-led military operations “out of area”, getting closer to Brussels has produced a strange self-confidence with the Macedonian officials who now get encouraged to create enemies even when it is not necessary. It happens intermittently that some of them (symbolically) engage in threatening other states, while trying to prove their loyalty and commitment to US and/or NATO policies. Thus Prime Minister Zaev did almost declare war on North Korea from the UN General Assembly in 2017 (*SDK*, 22 September 2017). Defense Minister Sekerinska has repeatedly sent strong messages to Moscow to stop interfering in internal affairs (*META*, 9 August 2017).

Macedonia’s military capabilities are more than modest. For 2020, Macedonia is ranked 127 of 138 out of the countries considered for the annual Global Fire Power review (*GFP*, 2020). Cynical observers have remarked that Macedonia’s military budget equals 75 minutes of annual Pentagon spending; they argue that it is a country with a \$12.6 billion GDP (lower than Montana’s), a population of just over 2 million, and an army the size of a stamp. The conclusion is that NATO’s 30th member is just another hanger-on. Macedonia was more useful as a political and symbolic asset for the US foreign and military policy when the States needed to demonstrate world-wide support for their actions. It’s unclear if that would be reciprocated in case of a military need.

So far Macedonia has had some military benefits from previous NATO-related actions mostly in terms of military experience and training (although it remained unclear where these skills would be used in the future), in addition to certain military donations. But from now on all new engagements will have to be paid for by Macedonia’s own financial means. In other words, military security would be gained at the expense of socio-economic welfare of the citizens. Macedonia may never become a target of a military assault but it has been contributing militarily elsewhere and will do so as long as it is a NATO member (and in particular, a US ally). In the worst case scenario, obviously Macedonia would not be able to respond and defend itself unless there is support from the partner-states. However, the key problem remains the geopolitical location at the new “Cold war” front-line where proxy war games are quite possible.

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4) *Internal (inter-ethnic) peace and stability*: The premise that NATO has a mission or even potential to affect internal conflict resolution is one of the biggest myths related to the alliance. It's empirically proven that NATO effect is nil when it comes to the internal affairs and disputes in its member-states. While NATO may get involved in non-democracies' internal affairs (since 1999 legitimized by the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect), it is unimaginable that any NATO official would comment on the internal affairs in the member states (the cases of Northern Ireland or Catalonia are enough evidence of this).

NATO's involvement in the Macedonian internal conflict dynamic has been more than evident, especially since 1999 and particularly in the 2001 military conflict and its aftermath. Throughout the years it has become clear that the main weaknesses and threats for the Macedonian state are internal rather than external. Quite early, the state leadership figured out that it needed stronger police forces than military ones. Hence the state security strategy has always been more concerned with internal challenges, although declaratively joining NATO was the primary strategic goal. It is unnecessary to explore in more detail here that the road to NATO has often been disturbed by the intra- and inter-ethnic confrontations, including the ones in Kumanovo 2015 as previously elaborated. The official narrative, however, argues that NATO membership is practically the only matter that brings the citizens together, i.e. that it is glue for a society that is deeply divided along ethnic lines. In other words, NATO (together with the EU) has been one of few matters in which both major ethnic communities share the same high consent – although probably for different reasons. In fact, a number of Albanian politicians have mentioned that NATO and the EU constitute the only geopolitical environment for the entire Albanian people to unite despite the state borders. As already said, the Albanians have always been more willing to accept the trade-off between the Euro Atlantic integration goals and the Macedonian identity markers. On the other hand, more than once the Albanian political parties have played the card of a possible veto from Albania for the sake of further implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. (*Anadolu Agency*, 20 May 2015). It is worth emphasizing that overcoming the final obstacle to NATO membership (i.e. the name deal) not only represented the most challenging issue for the society but also sowed the seed for future polarization within the Macedonian ethnic community. If things go from bad to worse (in terms of accepting Bulgarian identity

demands for the sake of the beginning of the EU accession talks), the seed of internal schism is going to blossom.

In this respect one should not forget that there have always been some whispers over the possible division of the country between Bulgaria (and Serbia) and Albania, as a US senator implied some years ago. In fact, in 2017 the US republican senator Dana Rohrabacher asserted that Macedonia “is not a country” and should be divided among Kosovo, Bulgaria, and possibly other neighbors. He suggested that Kosovars and the Albanians in Macedonia should become part of Kosovo, while the rest of Macedonia should become part of Bulgaria or other countries (*RFERL*, 9 February 2017). Despite the immediate State Department reaction in support of the country’s territorial integrity, there was quite an upheaval since some ideas about redrawing the Balkan borders often come from journalistic and political sources. For instance, Timothy Less, leading researcher at the Centre for Geopolitics and Grand Strategy at the University of Cambridge, published a piece arguing for a redefinition of borders along ethnic lines (2016). He advocated a total redesign of the existing state boundaries in the Balkans, on the basis of a dubious assumption that the multi-ethnic states (such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia) are to be regarded as inherently dysfunctional, whereas the ethnically homogenous states (such as Serbia, Albania and Croatia) are to be regarded as far more successful. Also, Less advanced the claim that the peoples in the Balkans, having lost any enthusiasm for the multi-ethnic status quo, predominantly strive to finally accomplish the imagined mono-ethnic greater state projects:

“it would be a mistake to ignore the will of the electorates, which have persistently shown their dissatisfaction with the multi-ethnic status quo and are demanding change. The choice facing Western policymakers is either to recognize the legitimacy of these demands and radically change their approach or to continue with the current policy and risk renewed conflict.”

It produced upheaval in the academic community. For instance, Zlatko Hadzidedic (2017) argued that it was not a coincidence at all that Less (a former diplomat in Sarajevo and Skopje) came out with such a trial balloon and that his arguments were dangerous. In his mind,

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“a radical geopolitical reconfiguration of the entire Balkans, including dismemberment of the existing states proclaimed as dysfunctional and their eventual absorption into the imagined greater states, may well become politically acceptable in all corners of the world. All that is needed is to juxtapose this ‘peaceful’ option and the fabricated projection of imminent war as the only available alternatives, and offer to implement the former at a particular conference... It does not matter that the option of real full-scale war is not available at all, due to the Balkan states’ incapacity to actually wage it; what is required for implementation of the proposed geopolitical rearrangement of the Balkans is to spread the perception that the permanent rise of political conflicts in the region inevitably leads to a renewed armed conflict.”

In spite of all these considerations, one crucial point is that internal peace and stability by default do not depend on membership in military alliances and creation of imaginary (ethno-nationalist) communities but on the wellbeing of the citizens. Macedonia remains an internally weak state that is hardly able to fulfil citizens’ basic human needs. The consociational political and constitutional framework (i.e. the power sharing model introduced through the Ohrid Agreement) only makes things more complicated as the tendencies show further ethnic segregation and federalization of the state. The same applies to Bosnia and Herzegovina, although that case is a bit more complicated than the Macedonian one. Obviously, a military alliance is hardly a sufficient ‘glue’ to provide for a genuine political community based on a democratic social contract, despite the efforts to normalize it as a ‘civilian force’ and normative power actor.

Even in July 2020 (with Macedonia already a NATO state), Timothy Less suggested re-ordering the dysfunctional Balkans:

“the US would be wary of changes to borders elsewhere in the Balkans... Instead, the US would insist these peoples – and the Bosnian Croats - stay put, but it would try to meet their desire for self-determination with a new settlement in both Bosnia and North Macedonia that gave these peoples virtual independence within an outwardly unified state. To sweeten the deal, it would also encourage local governments to dissolve the borders separating national groups by dismantling passport controls,

promoting cross-border co-operation and supporting dual citizenship.”

This time indeed this vision fits well in the already launched mini-Schengen zone among Belgrade, Tirana and Skopje, a form of economic space for cooperation but also political competition, which has been blessed by Brussels. Less predicts that under Biden the US would advocate EU-goslavia (2020a).

Internal positive peace is a rather challenging endeavour in contrast to negative peace (absence of overt violence), which has been hailed as the ultimate achievement of the Western peace-building in Macedonia and in the region. According to Johan Galtung (1996), positive peace means integration of human society based on values such as equality, meeting human needs, social justice – or in short, absence of structural violence (i.e. the invisible violence embedded in the state’s and/or international’s structures). Galtung (2016) believes that ignoring structural violence means that societies-regions-worlds are repressive, while positive peace consists of attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies - for human potential and nature to flourish. NATO is the quintessence of both negative peace (when not intervening) and structural violence (when embedded in the system as allegedly force for peace, which consumes enormous funds from civilian spheres for the sake of security). The Ohrid Agreement is an example of both negative peace hailed as the ultimate achievement and constitutionalization of the structural violence and social inequalities, making use of ethnic division and producing overall discrimination and pacification of any citizens’ dissent. Membership of NATO has no effect to the structural violence already entrenched in the Macedonian institutional power-sharing system. As a NATO member it contributes to the international structures of violence and militarism.

5) *Economic development* - The increase of military spending in one of the poorest countries in Europe seems excessive particularly in time of a pandemic. It seems Hungary has found a way to ‘resolve’ economic problems induced by the pandemic with further militarization of society. Viktor Orban says it’s a “good opportunity” – the creation of a 3,000-strong volunteer military reserve unit to absorb at least some of the more than 120,000 people who have lost their jobs due to the covid-19 pandemic

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(*BIRN*, 29 July 2020). However, Orban is not alone in using military sector for 'resolving' other issues.

Interestingly, there had been almost no cost-benefit analyses prior to the 2020 NATO accession, and certain comparisons with the other states in the neighbourhood have been made *a posteriori* (*Parlamentaren institut*, 2020). For instance, the first civilian defense minister and long-time professor of peace and economics Trajan Gocevski has never published a word about costs, although his list of publications is one of the longest one in the country. In 2018 he coauthored a book entitled "Euroatlantic integrations as a security key: economic development and international security", which was promoted by the then National coordinator for NATO (and forthcoming president of the Republic) Stevo Pendarovski. According to the authors, the scientific contribution of this book is shedding light on the role of NATO in enhancing economic cooperation among the member-states. Obviously, NATO was pictured as an imitation of the EU common market, which gives not only a distorted picture of the military alliance but also shugarcoates the organization as an amazing achievement (after the bitter pill of the Prespa agreement). The general conclusion is that the economic costs are not only worth accepting, but will increase the economic security of the country. In short, no one has ever dared question the mantra of NATO membership as an asset for economic development and social wellbeing. An EU-funded NGO (*Institut za evropska politika*) has issued a couple of publications (Velkovska 2018, Chekovic 2018) with a clearly predisposed attitude – to prove that NATO membership is worthwhile no matter what (material and non-material) costs have been involved. On the other hand, there is a conventional wisdom that NATO membership brings, one way or another, economic development and social wellbeing. Since taking power, Zaev has been repeatedly arguing the same. In December 2019, for instance, he spoke to the students of the Faculty of Philosophy within the debate entitled "NATO caravan":

"Security and stability of the country are the basis for its economic growth and development. It affects the improvement of the country's credit rating and enhancement of domestic and foreign investments, which consequently produce more employment, bigger export and trade as well as faster economic growth. Thus our economy becomes competitive in the great European market, which is North Macedonia's biggest trade

partner, and which encompasses the biggest number of NATO member states" (*Pravdiko*, 12 December 2019).

Interestingly, the Vienna Institute of International Economic Studies published a report arguing that indeed NATO accession can bring its own benefits in terms of FDI inflows. Its author, Mario Holzner (2019) argues:

"In economic terms, we find that NATO accession is even more important for the country than entry into the EU, at least in the sense that it provides the most serious security guarantee available to foreign investors (for example, US military support). This then helps countries to attract much needed foreign direct investment. Given that the economic model of Central, East and Southeast Europe (CESEE) has been based, from the very beginning of transition, on capital and technology transfers from Western Europe via FDI, this is of utmost economic importance."

Having been aware of the Macedonian public's expectations from NATO, Stoltenberg repeated the mantra as well: "North Macedonia's accession to NATO will bring stability and peace in the region, which is of crucial importance for economic prosperity." (*RSE*, 30 March 2020). The domestic NATO apologists have also been arguing that NATO membership *per se* means that Macedonia would be perceived as a safe country for foreign direct investments as well as for increasing domestic investments. Some economists argue that NATO member states are perceived as low risk destinations, but also the price for foreign credits would be lower than before. It would mean chipper financing of state capital investments in the future. As for exports, according to the Economic Chamber of Macedonia's representative, it is expected to use the advantages of the NATO procurement market (*RSE*, 31 March 2020).

Indeed the Macedonian companies are now eligible to join this group of providers for NATO needs but the key question is: which companies are able to offer products and to compete in the free market among the NATO competitors, and how much will Macedonia be able to gain vis-a-vis NATO membership costs. These costs include the NATO fee (0.08% of BDP) or around 200 million EUR annually, while 20% of the defense budget will have to be spent on military equipment. Sekerinska already announced that the financial budget for the Army will increase in the coming years, while a

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commitment was made that by 2024 Macedonia would try to reach the required threshold of 2% of GDP (an additional 100 million EUR). On the eve of the April 2020 early elections (which were eventually postponed), the government projected the 2021 budget as the highest one ever, including 3.1 percent for defense purposes (plus an additional 6.8 percent for the police).

Paradoxically, the membership to NATO found the Macedonian army in a very poor condition (Vankovska, 2020a), as for years the scarce resources had been used merely for the salaries and for the so-called 'declared forces' (the elite forces to be presented to Brussels and used for foreign missions). For instance, at the peak of the 2015/2016 migrant crisis, military personnel protested in front of the government building, asking for equal treatment with policemen. On that occasion, retired general Nikolovski stressed that the Army had been neglected (Blaževski, 2016). Former Minister of Finance and governor of the National Bank Petar Gošev (2016) pointed out a tendency to militarize the police and called for improvement of the Army's professional and social standing. Despite all efforts to meet NATO requirements (2 percent of GDP), the underdeveloped State failed to provide a decent standard of living for its military professionals (Bakreski et al., 2015). On the threshold of NATO membership, the military lacked its basic everyday-life resources (such as food, uniforms, and even socks and boots). In order to illustrate the dire straits of the new NATO army, one could refer to an interview with the Army's chief-of-staff for Telma TV on 12 July 2018, in which Gen. Metodija Velichkovski confirmed that with a defense budget set at only 1 percent of GDP, the top priority was purchasing new boots and uniforms for servicemen. In the meantime, the number of military missions other than war increased. The weak State capacities in other sectors are often supplemented by enlisting the military's help (for instance, in disaster relief, border protection during the migrant crisis, and even for the mass extermination of wild boars). The pandemic has imposed other uses of the military, during the state of emergency but also during peacetime. In early November 2020, the Government announced that it had accepted the Ministry of Health's request for additional assistance from the Army in keeping order in the hospitals along with the policemen (*Plusinfo*, 4 November 2020).

The latest report of the World Bank (October 2020) indicate that the pandemic is hitting Macedonia hard, with the overall situation "darkening an already dim economic outlook in the country". It also concludes that as a

result, the country is struggling with its deepest recession in two decades affecting all sectors of the economy and economic activity is forecast to decline by 4.1 percent in 2020. The pressure created by the pandemic has brought lingering and untreated problems in the country's health system right to the surface (*BIRN*, September 2020). Country's death toll per capita is among the highest in the world. The unemployment rate had slightly dropped prior to the pandemic, but is constantly increasing.

The labor minister blamed the returning diaspora emigrants for the spike in the unemployment rate, where more than 40,000 newly unemployed people were registered since the start of the coronavirus epidemic (*Republika*, 29 November 2020). The statement was met with strong disapproval since the government took office with a promise it would bring back those citizens who had left the country allegedly because of the previous regime's lack of European perspectives. The finance minister confirmed that a major source of revenue in 2021 would be the sale of publicly owned companies or shares the state holds in largely private companies. Faced with an enormous deficit and a declining economy, the government announced attempts to sell off even strategic companies such as the railways and the post office, as well as the state share in the Macedonian Telekom, the OHIS chemical plant that sits on potentially valuable land and many others. His message merely read: "Everything must go, it's all on sale" (*MINA*, 12 November 2020). The 2021 state budget has reaches its highest ever cost, although it looks like a pipe-dream: even the Prime Minister admits that the state has financial projects it does not know how to pay for. The prospects for deepening the already existing *debtocracy* are real as well as the existence of the so-called *odious debt* bearing in mind the irresponsible public spending. Public debt by the end of 2020 is expected to breach the psychological barrier of 60 percent of the GDP (*RSE*, 7 October 2020).

The pandemic may be used as a justification for the failed economic expectations from the NATO membership, which can be hardly dismissed as one of the reasons. However, the government fails to admit that NATO membership *per se* does not bring economic progress. It could set an ambience but it is up to the local businesses to take advantage of the new possibilities. The claims that all the other NATO enlargements meant increase of foreign direct investments in the respective new member-states is also is a rather weak argument. First of all, there is an inconclusive assertion that the higher level of FDI by default brings higher living standard

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for the local population. The driving force of any capital is profit not altruism. Capital moves across the borders depending on the profit projections, quality and price of the labor force, etc. while security environment is just one of the factors that influence the decision where to invest more. For instance, neighboring Serbia with its neutral geopolitical status has managed to attract far more FDI (German, Japanese, Chinese, etc.) than Macedonia. The new environment created due to the covid-19 pandemic has already changed the world. Actually even prior to the pandemic, economists worried that the world had passed 'peak globalization' and introduced a new term for a new phenomenon: slowbalization (*Foreign Policy in Focus* 2019; *Economist* 2019).

OECD (May 2020) has concluded the following: FDI flows are expected to fall by more than 30% in 2020 even under the most optimistic scenario; FDI flows to developing countries are expected to drop even more because sectors that have been severely impacted by the pandemic, including the primary and manufacturing sectors, account for a larger share of their FDI than in developed economies; FDI flows have steadily declined over the past five years, and they could remain below pre-crisis levels throughout 2021 if the public health measures and economic support policies are not effective. Some research projects proved long ago that better health increases FDI (*NBER*, 2005). Bearing in mind the disastrous effects of the long-term brain drain processes, one could hardly wonder that foreign investors bypass Macedonia as a destination. NATO membership would hardly change anything in this respect, especially bearing in mind that the entire mantra about the Alliance was based on false premises about better life and wellbeing for the impoverished population. Instead of a viable economic strategy and policy, Macedonia is drowning into debtocracy and wishful thinking that "NATO is going to defend us, and the EU is going to feed us" (to mention a popular phrase used in a column written by the Macedonian writer Venko Andonovski). At the same time, the foreign policy and economic choices for NATO members states are limited at a time when Asian (Chinese, notably) economy is on the rise. Students of Sino-Balkan relations rightly argue that the relations between the Balkans and China (and in general, between CESEE and China) have become a subject of discussion for EU diplomats who often adopted an alarmist approach about China's growing clout in the region, and have frequently warned that some of the practices of Sino-Balkan relations may not comply with EU enlargement efforts in the region. According to Vangeli (2019), it is conceivable that over

this period, which saw increased frictions between the US and China, and some tensions between the EU and China, the Macedonian government also looked to stay out of any potential complications in the relations with its Western partners that could have potentially arisen from any closer relations with Beijing.

6) *Political democratization and stabilization*: The entire process of NATO enlargement has been marked by the claims that the process helps in democratization of the candidate countries, while NATO family embraces only true democracies. For the time being, I am intentionally leaving aside the question how democratic is the West today. Dan Reiter (2001, p. 41) elaborated clearly the arguments of the supporters of NATO enlargement who claimed that it would help to stabilize Eastern Europe in at least three ways.

First, a strong Western commitment to former communist states in this region would deter any future Russian aggression. Second, enlargement would reduce the likelihood of conflict among NATO members, ameliorating security dilemmas and forcing them to accept current borders and pursue the peaceful resolution of disputes. Third, it would further democratization in the region, which in turn would help to stabilize the area because democracies are unlikely to fight each other.

Based on the experience of NATO enlargement towards the East, he rightly concluded that NATO membership did not and would not advance democratization in Europe. The overview of the situation in Poland, Hungary, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Montenegro etc. – and now Macedonia too, proves him right. It would be wrong to argue that it was all NATO's fault but to claim the opposite is also wrong. The majority of the new Europe's members have been accepted (some of them both in NATO and the EU) for geopolitical rather than democratic criteria. Indeed Russophobia still works, not as a way of promoting democracy, but by enhancing nationalism and militarism in some parts of Europe. As said before, security dilemmas are ever present.

NATO enlargement has indeed used the democratization thesis to cover geopolitical interests. To some degree it had certain positive effects in terms of transition towards democracy, as noted by many authors. For the sake of NATO membership, many aspiring states, including Macedonia, have

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carried out a number of reforms, notably in the realm of democratic control of armed forces and more generally, in security sector. Democratic principles have also been invoked whenever other reforms had to be carried out, in terms “we have to do this or that because we want to be a part of the democratic NATO family”. Alexandra Gheciu (2005, pp. 1-2) has noted that:

“the nature and dynamics of power exercised by NATO departed significantly from the prevailing conception of (coercive) power characteristic of international relations... NATO was involved in the politics of shaping legal and institutional arrangements in countries of former Communist bloc... In some cases, the liberal, pro-West elites of Central and Eastern European countries encountered domestic opposition as they were trying to implement NATO prescribed reforms... There were several instances in which, when faced with such obstacles, Eastern European decision makers appealed to NATO for help, asking the alliance to exercise pressure on reluctant domestic actors.”

To some degree, Macedonia mirrored the same pattern. However, NATO’s involvement here had been far from symbolic or restricted to defense/security reforms. It went so far as to affect constitution making, referendum processes, law making, media propaganda, etc. This is particularly true with regard to the so-called Ohrid process (i.e. implementation of the power sharing model from the 2001 Framework agreement), which was supposed to mitigate internal (intra- and/or interethnic) frictions.

The end result of the three-decade long transition towards democracy is a new wave of stabilitocracy and authoritarianism. For the sake of stability and geopolitical interests, the Western power centers have supported elites with no democratic credentials. So it resulted in a give-and-take scenario. In the words of Srdja Pavlovic who coined the term (2017) the essence of this diagnosis is that

“the core value of stabilitocracy is a conviction that protecting and promoting Western interests is paramount... Regimes which understand that core conviction and are willing to protect and sustain western geopolitical, security, military, economic or energy-related interests in a given country are usually spared

the wrath of the great powers such as the United States, the UK, or the European Union. Local autocrats, therefore, can do whatever suits their needs in their private domains. Any criticism directed towards them is usually dismissed as either sour grapes from a political loser or an attempt by retrograde undemocratic political forces to gain the upper hand”.

Throughout time, not only have the liberal principles and institutional democracy been bypassed for a ‘greater good’ and through blessing by the so-called ‘international community’, but also human rights have become endangered. In fact, any criticism towards NATO is seen as a betrayal, while the pressure on freedom of thought and speech is paramount despite the fact that the West overtly speak of NATO’s ‘brain death’. Macedonia’s way to NATO way most scandalously paved by making democracy a collateral damage to NATO enlargement during the Prespa process (Vankovska, 2021). What has been left out of democracy is now being sacrificed at the altar of the EU negotiation process.

The problem is more general, of course, as NATO official narrative refers to its role as “the military backbone for democracy” (NATO, 19 June 2020). It looks as if military and democracy go hand by hand, but only in the bizarre oxymorone phrase.

Instead of Conclusion: Looking Ahead

Let's again state the obvious: Macedonia is the 30th member-state of NATO – and it's an unequivocal fact! Time for state's security and foreign policy considerations and analyses seem to be over. According to the Alliance's rules, a state cannot leave sooner than one year after the announcement of its intention. However, Montenegro signed a different agreement, as the media reported after engaging into a 'fact-checking' endeavor: "Whatever the programmes and wishes of the new ruling majority in Montenegro, the treaty the country has signed forbids it from even starting withdrawal for 20 years (*BIRN*, 7 September 2020). In the Macedonian case, even mentioning such an idea would be seen not only as impossible but also as treacherous blasphemy. In other words, even in the case of (a predictable) disappointment over the benefits of the NATO membership, it is hardly possible to imagine a scenario like this. In Montenegro, as soon as the three-party coalition took power from the old and corrupted but 'pro-West' ruler Milo Đukanović, there was no mention of changing foreign policy course whatsoever. The new elite did everything necessary to reassure the Western powers that it would not change the geopolitical balance in the Balkans.

The Macedonian leaderships have had blinkered vision in rushing to the membership status willy-nilly: *Aut Caesar Aut Nihil*, either NATO or death. Actually, before the Prespa episode (i.e. name change deal), the moral of the NATO story was that it was nothing but a necessary step towards the main achievement: the EU membership status. A year later when Macedonia got a cold shoulder from the EU (thanks to Macron's reluctance towards further EU enlargement), all of a sudden NATO membership became a key reward. The President of the Republic put it explicitly: NATO membership is not a consolation, but it is the main prize (*RTS*, 1 November 2019). And he got it right for one simple reason: the Prespa process has never been meant to bring (now North) Macedonia close to the EU but to complete the Western geopolitical agenda. However, there was also another equation. Namely, in the words of the Macedonian defense minister, it was NATO not the EU that saved the Prespa agreement! (*Euroactiv*, 6 June 2019). Even prior to the entry date in March 2020, the country had been paying far too high price for the sake of future membership in the hope it would be repaid. Now one would hope that the

elites would finally learn that there is no such thing as a free lunch in international relations (alliances). A member state may gain something but it should be also ready for losses and high prices, as the membership brings obligations and responsibilities too.

The old British statesman Lord Palmerson is remembered giving a speech in the House of Commons in March 1848: “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.” Small and weak states of today obviously lack statesmanship, leadership and vision. The Macedonian elites are expected to defend the national interests first, i.e. to try to use the Alliance’s benefits rather than to obey the wishes of the most powerful players. It’s an empty myth that alliances are unanimous and released from any internal frictions. There are conflicting interests and as they are established the alliances may end when its members see no use for it (in this case, if the key player, USA, does not find it useful for its national interests). The dependence on the state of affairs in the key state, and particularly on the administration in the White House, makes things even more complicated. As things stand now, president-elect Biden is going to conduct a hawkish foreign policy, which promises “speaking softly and carrying a big stick” in order to go ahead. The question is how far are the NATO member states follow the old/new American militant policy around the globe.

Macedonia seems to turn a blind eye when it comes to the dramatic changes in the world and within NATO, or at least it pretends to do so. NATO is definitively not the organization that came out triumphant after the Cold War. Its constant search for military mission and *raison d'être* has not come to a closure to the dilemma of whether it is a military alliance or a political organization. It is probably both although the more hawkish power circles complain that it is an alliance that cannot fight any more (while others have translated the acronym as No Action Talk Only). As a response to all challenges from the past period, an expert report entitled “NATO 2030: United for a New Era” has been drafted. The expert team included a number of experts and former political officials, such as Thomas de Maizière and Wess Mitchell. However, the verbal clash between the US and Turkish foreign ministers overshadowed its public presentation, showing how difficult it would be to preserve the Alliance’s internal cohesion (*Politico*, 1 December 2020). In substance, the Report argues for a more determined position of NATO, while the enemies are directly pointed out (Russia and China). Interestingly, the new vision of NATO, which was supposed to be a

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response to the claim of 'brain death', displays overtly not only ambition for a leading position in Europe (and with relation to the EU), but also envisages a more resolute institutional and policy penetration in various spheres that are not necessarily related to the defense/military (such as education, research, innovation, development, etc.) (NATO, 25 November 2020). Although it is still early to predict if this vision is going to be functional, the militarization tendency is emphasized more than ever – in order to prove NATO is 'kicking alive'. The ideas of international peace and security (embedded in the UN Charter) are completely marginalized and bypassed, while the world is projected as a global battlefield. In short, NATO's response to its irrelevance is more NATO, i.e. strengthened and enlarged Alliance. Even if the world is not bipolar any longer, such a posture makes NATO's rivals reluctant with respect to any closer cooperation on a political, but also on a military level. At the end of the day, the self-fulfilling prophecy may indeed come true.

From Macedonia's point of view one should pay attention to the benefits and costs that arise from its membership status. As it is still early to come with a final conclusion and to make sound predictions, one should pay attention to what is most necessary to do under the current circumstances. It may sound as a post festum deliberation, of course, since many important things were not achieved and taken into account prior to the entrance into NATO. It would be reasonable to suggest that the leadership, and wider – the Macedonian strategic community – should re-think the national security strategy in the light of the state's current status. But what is logical and reasonable does not count in a semi-protectorate. It is not known of any procedure or a case where a state has been kicked out from NATO – i.e. NATO membership cannot be taken away. Even the small states could protect their vital interests prior to giving consent to anything that they see harmful for their existence. Macedonia has been gambling with its vital and national interests for the sake of one particular political interest (NATO membership). Furthermore, it has failed so far to build a competent and professional diplomacy, and diplomatic activities are going to be important in the future. It should re-think the 2 percent nonsense and instead pay more attention to other budgetary priorities. This becomes urgent in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. It should also re-think the use of Krivolak in the view of possible political, socio-economic and environmental repercussions. A green economy is a rare Macedonian advantage that should not be given away.

In short, Macedonia should finally grow up and play not in accordance with the others' demands but take the best possible advantages of the NATO membership for the sake of its own ('selfish') national interests. The obvious problem relating to this proposition is the fact that to a high degree the very same Western powers that sit in NATO are also powerful members of the EU. In order to please them and keep the EU door open Macedonia may be still vulnerable various blackmails over a relatively long period of time (longer than 10-15 years probably). If there is a goal to join the EU in order to preserve the statehood and nationhood, then the elite should read carefully Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea". Macedonia's path to the EU membership must not end up like the fish from the novel. Membership of certain international organizations is not a goal in itself but a means for achieving crucial national interests.

When it comes to the internal peace, it is important to stress that one of the myths about NATO is that it helps resolve internal conflicts and tensions in divided societies. This is a blatant fake proposition. Catalonia and Northern Ireland, to mention just a couple of examples, show that NATO's *raison d'être* has nothing to do with the internal affairs of its member states. Unfortunately, Macedonia still remains a divided society with deep internal contradictions. The people will not be able to live off NATO euphoria and the reality check will be harsh.

The other side of the coin reads: what can NATO gain with a new member like Macedonia? Obviously, Macedonia is unable (although willing) to spend lot of money on a military shopping spree. According to the *Defence News* weekly, Macedonia is already included in the US-led European Recapitalization Incentive Program (*ERIP*). America's multimillion-dollar plan is to provide incentives for allies to renounce buying Russian equipment. Douglas Barrie of the International Institute for Strategic Studies rightly points out that the programme "ticks two boxes, removing Soviet-era equipment from NATO inventories and provides a win for U.S. industry". Macedonia is slated to secure a 30 million USD grant to purchase 20 infantry fighting vehicles on the condition that it get rid of its Russian armored cars and pledges not to make any further deals with Moscow. Of course, the deal does not come as a gift. The Chief of Staff was seen at the London military fair. However, the main value that Macedonia brings to the Alliance is geopolitical: as political analysts told *The New York Times*, the addition of Macedonia to NATO is a setback for President Putin, who sees NATO as an expansionist military force on his country's doorstep.

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A more palpable contribution Macedonia may make is the Krivolak Military Training Centre. It is not only one of the largest in South-East Europe, but one that is conveniently situated for more than just training purposes. It has already hosted a number of US and other NATO soldiers and witnessed many military training exercises with mostly US equipment and weapons. Macedonian officials have been repeatedly offering this part of its territory for a permanent military basis. There has been no debate or analysis whatsoever what it means to harbor a military base on the state territory, or better is has been justified with the same old phrases about increased military and economic security. No comparative experiences have been used, especially in terms of economic costs and ecological damages.

The country's main security concerns, however, remain in the sphere of internal (political, economic, social, ecological and societal/ethnic) challenges and dilemmas, but also to the regional developments. The worst fears relate to a possible division of Kosovo (rumours about such a scenario have been circulating between some quarters in Belgrade and Pristina, along with contradictory reactions from Washington D.C. and Brussels), and the nightmare caused by a hypothetical announcement of the future unification of Kosovo and Albania. Unfortunately, NATO membership (or even increased military security) is not the right cure for Macedonia's (non-military-related) ailments. Even from a military (and geopolitical) point of view, one should keep in mind that *Pax Americana* is not what it used to be, especially in the region where American and European interests may collide.

The price paid for NATO based security (i.e. the concessions made in the deals with Bulgaria and Greece for the sake of Euro-Atlantic and European integration) generates a self-fulfilling prophecy: everything that has been done in order to avoid a possible disaster has only worsened the existing (bad enough) state of affairs. Interestingly, at a round table on EU integration and the Western Balkans held in New York, Zaev argued that deals like the Prespa Agreement are usually signed after wars (indeed, after a capitulation) (*YouTube*, September 2019). The national media echoed a rather divergent thesis but in the same fatalist tone: "Without North, Macedonia would capitulate". In short, the Prespa agreement was pictured as a matter of life or death, despite the symbolic death and political capitulation and sacrifice of the state's sovereignty for the sake of a membership of a military alliance.

In addition to the deep ethnic divisions, there are other, even deeper intra-Macedonian gaps. The political process has become antagonistic, as

witnessed by the paranoid, 'Cold war-like' rhetoric that pervades it: whoever is critical of the government and its deals (especially the Prespa and Bulgarian agreements) is portrayed as an anti-Western and pro-Russian enemy of the state. The generous support that Zaev's government received during the Prespa process has induced Macedonian politics to overstep the boundaries of decency set by the law. The state has been shaken by corruption scandals implicating high-ranking officials. The only economic activities that flourish are the marijuana business and construction works, all in the hands of close relatives of the Prime Minister's. All national resources have been sold off (or are on sale) to multinational companies, including suspicious deals of importing toxic waste from other countries in exchange for profit. This is the state of affairs in the country that has just fulfilled the dream of all previous generations.

The story does not end here because the other dream, the EU membership, brings even bigger internal and regional challenges and divisions. At first sight symbolic, but essentially very significant and different from the previous silence over all developments in and around the country, is the unsigned open letter, addressed to the Zaev regime by officers and soldiers of the Macedonian army, they demand that Macedonian national interests are protected during the negotiations with Bulgaria (*Republika*, 2 December 2020). It reads:

You are taking steps that seed doubt in many of us. You changed the name of the country, you removed the word Macedonia from our uniforms, are disarming us and "transform" our special operations and armored units, reducing us to light infantry and ground our air units. But most importantly of all, you sell off our history, give our heroes to our neighbors, and attempt to sell our language and identity. What's next, our religion, our territory? Will it ever end? We believe that you fail to uphold your obligations to protect the interests of Macedonia and to work sincerely in the interest of the citizens and our homeland.

They warn that their patience reaches its limit and that they are stay side by side with the people. This letter could be seen as a surprising and unusual incident coming from a new NATO army if it was not a part of a wider public reaction expressed by the policemen union, firemen association, but also if the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University and Macedonian Orthodox Church.

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About the Author



BILJANA VANKOVSKA is a full professor of political science and international relations at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, in Skopje, Macedonia. She has been one of the pioneer researchers in peace and conflict studies in the country. Vankovska was a Faculty staff member at European Peace University (EPU), Austria, Senior Fellow at the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), and Guest Senior Research Fellow at Copenhagen Peace Research Institute (COPRI). She is an International Advisor of Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Studies (TFF) in Lund (Sweden) and nominator for the Seoul Peace Prize. Currently she is editor-in-chief of the international scholarly journal *Security Dialogues*. Also for almost three decades she has been one of the most influential newspaper columnists and public intellectuals in Macedonia. In addition to ten textbooks published throughout her career, her most prominent scholarly works include:

“Macedonia: Troublesome Relationship Among the Military, Politics and Ethnicity”, in: *Oxford Encyclopaedia on the Military in Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020;

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