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NATO's membership of North Macedonia and beyond: Strategic priorities and strengthening the South wing in dealing with geo-political tensions

Introduction: Two moments

Macedonia before NATO membership? – New horizons that are intended to maintain the pace of military and political reform in expectation that soon the country will be invited to join NATO and complete the story of the NATO map and values in the region and contribute for a longstanding peace in Europe.

Macedonia after NATO membership? – Shared values, shared capabilities, shared commitment, and finally shared lessons.

The transatlantic approach and the expectations from the Balkan political elites

The transatlantic approach always is an important component all around and especially for the region of the Balkans. But in case of North Macedonia the issue is not anymore about the potential revisions of the transatlantic approach to the region. Eventually the transatlantic policy toward the Balkans is stuck in the policies of the late 1990s approach and needs to respond to today and tomorrow's regional and global economic, security, political dynamics, and attempts for external influences. But, however having in mind that the euro-Atlantic map in the region is already „colored” with NATO membership and North Macedonia is surrounded by these colors in the regional map, it's obvious that for the country it should be tossing away an outdated policy playbook. NATO membership it has been one of the main priorities in the last period and obviously the country has no more potential left to be out of the regional NATO „colored map”. The others in the Balkans already realized it in most of the cases.

While from one side, it is imperative that transatlantic policy toward the Balkans is refocused and reenergized to guide effectively the region toward a stable future in the transatlantic community – a policy goal which is within reach; from another side a careful preventive approach should be applied to stop further the often recent tendencies of more and more Balkans politicians that have been trying to do an exchange of pro-Euro-Atlantic platforms for some variation of nationalism.

There is a crucial interest for Balkans countries including North Macedonia to move from partnership through a real example of transformation and innovation for compromises toward a full membership, to move ahead the relationships with the neighbors, to contribute for new approaches of the Balkan's diplomacy and there is no any single interest left for these countries in remaining stuck in terms. The membership of North Macedonia to NATO presents both the journey and the final destination for peace and democracy within the country, because it is in fact in both the journey and the final destination for peace and democracy for the entire Balkans.

Ironically until recently, until NATO intervened in defusing the Balkan powder keg, the skeptics were claiming that none can resolve the „Balkan imbroglio”, because of the causes were supposedly hundreds of years of „ethnic hatred”¹.

The success of NATO in Balkans it will be a full testimony of the wisdom of taking a long-term perspective with regard to peace-keeping and reconstruction², only when North Macedonia will be a full member. And it is precisely this patience and persistence that NATO needs to finish the job of defining the western zone of security. And the most important lesson of all is the need for transatlantic cooperation.

That will confirm finally that the Alliance has been played and will play a significant political role and not only should a security role, and this role in the future to be based upon more profound, and more sustained political dialogue among the Allies³.

¹ J. de Hoop Scheffer, *Triumph of principle, patience and persistence*, [in:] *Historic Change in the Balkans*, „NATO Review” 2004.

² For more see: *Security through partnership*, NATO Public Diplomacy, Brussels 2005.

³ M. Rühle, *A more political NATO*, [in:] *NATO and the Middle East*, „NATO Review” 2005.

Advantages and factors of quicker respond for NATO membership

Countries like North Macedonia, located in significant European geo-political crossroad since the fall of communism and with very complex political and social inherited legacies and complex ethno-cultural realities need a fledged membership to NATO when the region is becoming an obvious target of Eastern influences; not because only these countries want to join, but because they have to join, as well. And not because of joining issue only, but because of the peaceful Balkans issue as well. The geopolitical relevance of the Balkans is some differ issue and the geostrategic games something else. North Macedonia should not be in middle of games of geopolitical tensions, or confrontations and as one of the rear country that still is not inside the Euro Atlantic map in the Balkans it would risk then to be in focus of these kinds of games. So first, as always it is about the stability component of the accession.

Second, through NATO membership of everyone in the Balkans we can come in the only way to a sustainable peace in Balkans. And in fact, not only in the Balkans. The geopolitical cross roads of South wing would be ideally balanced in that case.

Third, it is all then about the perspectives of the country. A full membership of North Macedonia to NATO will open the rest of other blocked roads of North Macedonian progress. Since the country will sort out the NATO membership issue, then it will be much easier on EU integration track, regardless if the EU is able at the moment to offer anything concrete to anyone in the view of enlargement, including North Macedonia.

From this perspective, it was a time for a new image of the country. The enthusiasm of North Macedonia for improving the relations with the neighbors should continue further. It should continue as well the enthusiasm for reforms. The democracy has to be restored and stability as well in a longer terms and not allow to be transformed into theatre of oligarch actors, or conspiracy policies that usually lead it to nowhere. With NATO membership North Macedonia have to show its capacities for contribution to peace and not risking the peace. With that it has a chance to improve the image of the country, and abandon the recent attempts to revise NATO procedures and policies even before a membership.

So, realistic reforms in practical way in three concrete and immediate tracks are required. First, Republic of North Macedonia needs to reform in realistic way its army for being able to answer to new challenges for establishing a peace in the Balkans. Second, at the same time it needs realistic and intensive reforms in substantial way of judiciary and public administration. And third, North Macedonia needs to continue with the cooperation with neighbors and all that to be intensified further and to use the experience of other countries.

Macedonia's efforts and results in implementing reforms related to NATO membership and building good neighborly relations

There are three major issues regarding the NATO integration of Republic of North Macedonia in the last period when one recalls the process of transformation from active partnership to fully-fledged membership:

- 1) *Issue 1* – North Macedonia's efforts and progress towards long-term political stability. *Status and Outcome* – Obvious and with clear records.
- 2) *Issue 2* – North Macedonia's efforts being made to find a solution to the name issue, which is crucial for the country to be able to join NATO. *Status and Outcome* – Obvious, and with clear outcome of compromise for sake of NATO and EU integration. The country had to agree on to find a mutually acceptable solution with Greece to the issue over its name before it can be invited to join NATO like it happened with the Prespa Agreement of June 2018 when the new name Republic of North Macedonia was contracted and later manifested in the Constitution.
- 3) *Issue 3* – The string need for the country's leadership in meanwhile and parallel to continue on the path of reform in security sector. *Status and Outcome* – The next challenge and brave approach. It should be a top priority. In the areas of defense and security sector reform, NATO and individual Allies have considerable expertise that the country can draw upon. In consultation with the Allies, the country to continue to implement a broad range of reforms in line with its Strategic Defence Review⁴.

For these three issues, countries going under strong reformation should not allow anymore to be a hostage of the electoral polls and electoral calculations of political actors of both sides like it has been happening over a decade being blocked to intensify the actions for the name resolution by the obstacle of the next elections in one or the other country and that the political elites would be concern to lose next elections if they would take action on name issue process.

In short or mid-term perspective, North Macedonia as far as sees NATO membership as a top priority it should continue to apply some „charming diplomacy” with Greece even after the Prespa Agreement like seems it did already with other neighbors and should continue sae with them further. From another hand, all the time, the country needs to be all the time flexible and start understand the position of its neighbors and avoid irritating them, as it is entering in a serious period of reformation process and an internal political overall support, or at least a normal dialogue is required.

⁴ *Relations with the Republic of North Macedonia*, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Brussels, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48830.htm (15 II 2019).

This is a time of „charming diplomacy” for North Macedonia to be as much as more friendly oriented to its neighbors and this is not a time of coercive diplomacy. This approach requires then more smile with anyone in the region and more laughs and talks with peoples of the region and politicians like do neighbors of one same village. Within these efforts North Macedonia needs more often to invite them for a coffee or tea whatever they call that coffee a Greek coffee, or a Turkish, or Bulgarian, or Serbian; or a Macedonian or an Albanian tea. And of course North Macedonia needs less and less Balkan malice. Of course, all that requires not so much concerns about next elections, or how to spread the hate like it was for many years back somehow a case with the political discourse of the rhetoric of country, but rather it requires as much as possible tolerance and compromises spirit in political decisions and actions. And logically it requires immediate concrete actions. For instance, it already did some charming steps, for instance like kind of steps as it was a case of airport's rename, or highways with politically and historically neutral names.

North Macedonia left the period and zone when until few years ago everyone was speaking the language of red lines, now it is entering a zone of acting with the spirit of compromises. It goes beyond red lines positioning now, and it need to look for the ways to advance the relations with neighbors and show that is committed in long term to de-blocking paradigms for sake of integration processes and contribution to collective alliances.

In meanwhile, all the reformation processes, like it was a case with the process of negotiations with Greece for the name issue, they should be inclusive, both in internal but as well as in external issues and which gives more charm to its diplomacy then among others.

„No-alternative approach” except Euro-Atlantic integration and friendly and cooperative relations with its neighbors

Republic of North Macedonia in practice has no other alternatives rather than NATO membership. The country needs to learn to make distinctions of options/choices from alternatives. Choices, i.e. options in both theory and literature for certain circumstances and situations, you always may find, but not each of them can be considered as an alternative. In the discipline of international relations, as alternatives for orientations of countries in the international system are considered only those options/choices from whom the countries can benefit rather than countries lose or get melt. Therefore, it is logical to raise the question: what is the rational alternative for Republic of North Macedonia except of NATO membership of which there all benefit and not lose anything? If there was up to date any other alternative (let say at least since the Bucharest summit 2008 until nowadays)

why there was it not offered, appeared or applied eventually any such alleged alternative? There exist several basic rhetoric public questions, but with clear answers that need no additional explanations when it is into a question the „no-alternative” situation out of NATO membership? Then, what does North Macedonia benefit in fact from the no-membership into NATO? Having in mind the internal societal characteristics whether it is more comfortable to be integrated with NATO, or to see NATO troops around itself? Is the country enough aware how much external economic investments benefited many countries since their joined to NATO, including Balkans countries; and whether these countries would have been able even to dream these investments if they could be at random in relation to the irrational question if NATO accession is worth, or not?

Therefore, Republic of North Macedonia is going to benefit soon from applying the so called „no-alternative approach” in terms of orientation of the country toward Euro-Atlantic integration and at the same time it is expected to continue a proactive approach for substantial partnership with NATO and the international community, and friendly and cooperative relations with its neighbors. The country needs to show that it is able to build, offer and apply partnership and not games, or some kind of provocative hostilities, as there showed the recent developments over the decade. The name dispute is resulted already with the Prespa Agreement of June 2018, which of course was not an easy process, but still there are required further efforts on strengthening other the neighboring relations.

Strengthening the South wing in dealing with geo-political tensions

The Allies commitment and geostrategic interests in keeping NATO’s door open to Western Balkan partners in the last period in terms of its strategic interests is linked to the issue of finding a stable way in coping with the Eastern provocations that are trying to challenge the transatlantic approach in the Balkan arena.

The Allies are committed to keeping NATO’s door open to Balkan partners that wish to join the Alliance, share its values and are willing and able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership. Euro-Atlantic integration is seen as the best way to ensure long-term, self-sustaining security and stability in the region⁵.

That’s why, among others it’s important for NATO to find the way and accept Macedonia as its 30. member. Beyond the name dispute resolution which served as a model of overcoming the historical hostilities for sake of peace and regional

⁵ *Ibidem.*

security, there are as well as ahead some new expectations from North Macedonia in relations to Russian influence.

After the blocked process of NATO integration for a longer period, until recently there was required in general Republic of North Macedonia only to renew a push to join NATO under provisional name (which happened in June 2018), having in mind that membership of the alliance which it has been blocked by a dispute with Greece over the Republic of Macedonia's name. But, in meanwhile things got complicated further and it went beyond that. Republic of North Macedonia occurred to had to prove its capacities that are able to find the way in overcoming those obstacles created by the attempts of the Russian influence that are seen as kind of challenges to the transatlantic approach in the Balkans through the ground of North Macedonia and with the theater of eventual geopolitical tensions through the local political elites⁶.

So, in terms of North Macedonian contribution after the potential NATO membership in December 2019 of course that the expectations should be to continue to contribute to the global fight against terrorism and especially through the model of the Countering/Preventing Violent Extremism, on what North Macedonia can be one of the leaders in the region in the coming period. But since 2016 the expectation from North Macedonia should as well be to show a real partnership potential and actions in dismissing the Russian influence and scenarios in out of the scope of Euro-Atlantic map including the North Macedonian terrain.

On 4 VI 2017 „The Guardian” published an article titled „Russia actively stoking discord in Macedonia since 2008”. The article says that the Russian diplomats have been involved in a nearly decade-long effort to spread propaganda and provoke discord in Macedonia, according to a leak of classified documents from the country's intelligence agency. The documents suggest that Moscow has been seeking to step up its influence all across the countries of the former Yugoslavia⁷. The article claims that Kremlin's goal is to stop them from joining NATO to pry them away from western influence, the reports say. The files were obtained by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and shared with „The Guardian”. Accordingly, for the last nine years, Macedonia has been „undergoing strong subversive propaganda and intelligence activity”⁸ directed from the Russian embassy and that influence operation began in 2008 when Greece blocked Macedonia's attempt to join NATO. So, how will be playing North Macedonia in relation to these constellations and influence, it remains to be seen in the coming

⁶ V. Latifi, *Russia's Threat to Provoke a New Geopolitical Confrontation*, [in:] *Threats and Challenges to Kosovo's Sovereignty*, ed. D. Philips, New York 2018, pp. 86-97.

⁷ *Russia actively stoking discord in Macedonia since 2008*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/04/russia-actively-stoking-discord-in-macedonia-since-2008-intel-files-say-leak-kremlin-balkan-nato-west-influence> (4 VI 2017).

⁸ *Ibidem*.

short and mid-term period. None is asking to stop communication and diplomatic relations with Russia, but none should also try to twist the core principles and orientations of the North Macedonian foreign policy related to the strategic and only one choice way for NATO and EU membership. Obviously, the country should not hide that its strategic partnership is oriented and vital to its internal nature toward the West and it has nothing to do to some irrational search for alternatives toward the East. Otherwise, it is going to be contrary to the foundation of the country itself in early 1990s.

Conclusion

Obviously, this is a dawning of new security era for the Balkans and for transatlantic approach. But this is a period of threat for new regional threats and divisions, and needs for security stronger positioning and re-configuration⁹. This is period of building a stability of NATO with its new members that it helped in making survive and creating then a stable states until recently, and now these countries are contributing for a NATO's performance and ability to stop the provocations and threats and for creating a joint stability in the region for a lasting peace. After NATO membership of North Macedonia which is supposed to happen in December 2019 NATO Summit, the country has to get engaged with a new and deeply reformed security structures, reformed public administration and political parties in essential way.

With accepting a compromise with Greece, Republic of North Macedonia showed that it has followed the will of majority of its people, it is closing all the gaps for possible penetration of Eastern attempts in provoking and influences its internal courses, and finally is choosing the path of compromise and solicited international assistance to facilitate the stability and peace in the region. In fact, the membership of the Republic of North Macedonia in NATO is a strategic priority of the country, as NATO seems to be a key factor for implementing stability and lasting peace in the region. In meanwhile the contribution of North Macedonia in priority challenging domains for NATO can be of great significance in strengthening with that the South Wing of NATO especially in responding to Russian influence, cyber-attacks, fake news phenomenon; sharing and promoting the transatlantic values, etc.

⁹ H. A. Conley, J. Bugajski, M. David, T. Toland, *A New Transatlantic Approach for the Western Balkans*, Washington 2011.

Abstract

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The membership of the Republic of North Macedonia into the NATO is a strategic priority of the country and the wider region. NATO is a key factor for implementing stability and lasting peace in the region for a longer period. The paper reaffirms that the membership of the Republic of North Macedonia into the NATO is supported by the majority of the citizens of the country, and therefore there is „no-alternative approach” except Euro-Atlantic integration and friendly and cooperative relations for the country with its neighbors. NATO is the key factor for implementing stability and lasting peace in the region. But at the same time, integration of North Macedonia to NATO as its 30th member brings as well as several strategic priorities for the Alliance and it contributes in strengthening the South wing in dealing with the geo-political tensions imposed by the Eastern influences. The paper seeks as well as to explore what are the advantages and factors of quicker respond for NATO membership of Republic of North Macedonia?

Keywords: NATO, North Macedonia, South wing, transatlantic approach, Balkans

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