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***CHALLENGING THE WEST BY (AB) USING THE VACUUM: THE CASE
OF THE RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN REPUBLIC OF NORTH
MACEDONIA***

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Abstract

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enlargement since the end of the Cold War prompted a debate on several significant issues. The NATO enlargement with the Eastern European countries generated a debate over whether it contributes to worsening the relations between the West and Russia. The same dilemma is present when it comes to the NATO enlargement with the Western Balkans countries. The paper argues that since NATO failed to complete its enlargement endeavors in the Western Balkans, in the case of, then, the Republic of Macedonia,¹ during the 2008 Bucharest Summit, it opened the scene for Russian influence. The case of Republic of North Macedonia (N. Macedonia) is examined in details in order to support the above stated premise. However, the paper argues that the Russian influence on the Balkans is not necessarily through military means. On the contrary, the paradigm has shifted and Russia is (ab) using the vacuum that has been left by NATO in the Western Balkan. This vacuum was created mainly because of the shift of NATO's focus from Europe to Central Asia and Middle East. In this newly created situation, the Western Balkan's countries which are weak democracies and lack stable institutions are influenced by Russia, which is projecting its influence through means of oil and gas industry, penetration in the banking sector and renewal of the sense for belonging to the same Slavic and Orthodox community.

Key words: *Western Balkans, Russia, Republic of North Macedonia, NATO, NATO enlargement*

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¹ Resolution 817 (1993) adopted by the Security Council, available at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/817>, Resolution 817 (1993) adopted by the Security Council, available at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/845> and Interim Accord between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia from 13.10.1995, available at: https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MK_950913_Interim%20Accord%20between%20the%20Hellenic%20Republic%20and%20the%20FYROM.pdf (last accessed on: 09.06.2019).

I. INTRODUCTION

After the Ukraine crisis from 2014, the main perception in the world news was that - Russia is back.² The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in the Donbas region have fueled fears of tensions and confrontation between the Russia and the West that could spread beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union. The Balkans has also been perceived as a new battleground between the West and Russia. In the US State Secretary John Kerry's view, countries like Serbia, Kosovo, N. Macedonia, and Montenegro are "in the line of fire" – much like Georgia or Moldova.³ German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated that "Russia [was] trying to make certain Western Balkan states politically and economically dependent".⁴

This paper attempts to analyse how the NATO enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans contributed to the increase of the Russian influence in the region. It will argue that since NATO failed to complete its enlargement endeavors in the Western Balkans in the case of, then, the Republic of Macedonia,⁵ during the 2008 Bucharest Summit, it opened the scene for Russian influence. The authors will use the case of N. Macedonia in the period from its independence in 1991 until the period after the Referendum on the Prespa Agreement with neighboring Greece in 2018⁶ and finalizing of the processes connected to the Agreement until the beginning of 2019, to support this argument.

The first part of the paper will analyze the NATO enlargement policy, especially since the end of the Cold War and in a context of the debate over whether NATO enlargement contributed towards worsening the relations between the West and Russia. Afterwards it will move towards the relations between Russia and the Western Balkans after the end of the Cold War in order to examine the rise of the Russian influence in the region, but also the change of the means in which that influence has been applied. The paper will argue that in this newly created situation, the Western Balkan's countries which are weak democracies and lack stable institutions are influenced by Russia, which is projecting its influence through means of oil and gas industry, penetration in the banking sector, but also through the cultural influence using the shared Slavic identity and shared Orthodox Christian religion (traditional milestones in the Russian "identity politics"). Finally, the paper will examine the case of the rising Russian influence in the N. Macedonia, particularly during one of the most dramatic

² See Guardian - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/18/vladimir-putin-chilling-address-duma-world-view> (last accessed on: 09.06.2019);

New York Times - <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/18/world/europe/russia-deports-german-polish-diplomats-retaliation.html>, (last accessed on: 09.06.2019),

and Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in South East Europe*, Yale University Press, 2017, p. 1.

³ B92, February 2015 - https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2015&mm=02&dd=25&nav_id=93293. (last accessed on: 09.06.2019)

⁴ Interview with Angela Merkel, *Welt am Sonntag*, 7 December 2014, <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article135110372/Wuerden-Sie-Krieg-mit-Russland-fuehren-Frau-Merkel.html>. (last accessed on: 09.06.2019)

⁵ Resolution 817 (1993) adopted by the Security Council, available at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/817>, Resolution 817 (1993) adopted by the Security Council, available at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/845> and Interim Accord between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia from 13.10.1995, available at: https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MK_950913_Interim%20Accord%20between%20the%20Hellenic%20Republic%20and%20the%20FYROM.pdf (last accessed on: 09.06.2019).

⁶ "Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences as Described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the Termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the Establishment of the Strategic Partnership Between the Parties", known as "Prespa Agreement". The full text of the "Prespa Agreement" available at: <https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/spogodba-en.pdf> (last accessed on: 09.06.2019).

and serious political crisis since its independence in which the country has been dragged into by the wiretapping scandal that was ongoing from 2015 until 2017.

II. NATO ENLARGEMENT

After the end of the Cold War, Western leaders seized a historic opportunity to open the doors of both North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union to the postcommunist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. NATO continued its expansion eastward - in 1999 Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joined the organization. Another expansion came in 2004, with the accession of seven Central and Eastern European countries: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Albania and Croatia joined on 1st April 2009. The most recent member state to NATO is Montenegro, which became member on 5th June 2017.⁷

The NATO enlargement since the end of the Cold War prompted a debate on several significant issues. One of them was whether the alliance contributes towards democratization in Europe. The answer to this question is not obvious, since it is argued that the degree to which NATO members are democratic is mainly a result of domestic politics.⁸ Moreover, the NATO enlargement with the Eastern European countries generated a debate over whether it will contribute to worsening the relations between the West and Russia. Critics of NATO enlargement in the 1990s argued that admitting Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic would damage the West's relations with Russia, empower nationalist elements within the Russian political scene, undermine the integrity of the alliance, and ultimately prove irrelevant to democratization in Central and Eastern Europe.⁹ Although it was largely debated whether it was the right move to take at the time, the fact is that the continent today is more peaceful, democratic, and free. The NATO strategy was mainly focused on renewing the transatlantic alliance and with that to reposition the United States and Europe to address the new global challenges.¹⁰ NATO took the lead in bringing Central and Eastern Europe into the vision of a peaceful Europe expanding its foreign policy horizons.

Today the world has changed dramatically and the new risks and opportunities on Europe's periphery need new approach accordingly. Since the end of the Cold War, the West has been faced with the battle with terrorism, an issue that has been in the forefront of its attention. This meant that West's attention was shifted from the Europe's periphery to the Middle East and Central Asia. Although, it was widely assumed that the Western Balkan states would all, with, possible, exception of Serbia in the case of NATO, eventually join the EU and NATO even that can no longer be taken for granted today. The Alliance lost precious time in integrating the Western Balkan countries in its Membership. The political crisis in N. Macedonia was a wakeup call for NATO to reassess and to strengthen its enlargement policy and continue expanding in the Western Balkans in order to contribute towards the regions' stability and to balance the expanding Russian influence.

In the period after the Cold War, Russia has changed as well. While in the 1990s, it was a weak state, which wanted to become part of the West; today it has retrieved some of its power and is challenging the West. Russia is using its energy resources as a political weapon that has made European countries reluctant to confront Russia over its antidemocratic behavior. In this newly created environment, Western policy toward the nations on Europe's

⁷ More info on NATO enlargement process on the NATO web page - www.nato.int (last accessed on:01.05.2019).

⁸ Ronald D. Asmus, 'Europe's Eastern Promise: Rethinking NATO and EU Enlargement', in *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008 Issue.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

periphery cannot remain the same, as if nothing has changed. NATO needs to articulate a new strategy in dealing with Russia, with its “near abroad”¹¹ and the Western Balkans.

III. RUSSIA AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

After the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the former Yugoslav federation, the new independent countries had different relations with Russia. The relationship has varied from country to country in different periods of time. However, the general notion is that the Russia's economic and political presence in the Balkan countries, whether they are inside the EU or not, is higher than at any time since the end of the Cold War.¹² Russia influence in the Western Balkan countries presents itself throughout several different means. Primarily, although Russian economic presence is not reflected in any major investments in the Western Balkans, it is mainly reflected through Russian energy firms' presence. Russian energy firms enjoy a near-monopoly in Serbia, Bulgaria and Bosnia's Republika Srpska. Another important factor of the Russian presence is the renewal of the sense for belonging to the same Slavic and Orthodox community, which is strong especially in Serbia and Republika Srpska, but has significant number of strong supporters, also, in Bulgaria, N. Macedonia, and even in Greece (only regarding the Orthodox Christianity). Moreover, many influential opinion leaders in the region and media echo the Kremlin's views on Ukraine.¹³ Serbia and N. Macedonia, both EU candidate countries, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, have refused to join the Union's sanctions towards Russia on Crimean annexation.¹⁴ Finally, what can be noted is the Russian support for the Balkan strongmen, like the President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, which contributes towards undermining the Western efforts to consolidate Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the Western Balkans, Russia's influence is minimal compared with the region's existing level of economic integration with the EU, since the Western Balkan countries import more goods from the EU than from Russia and they export twenty times more goods to the EU than to Russia.¹⁵ Russian influence is particularly strong in the energy sector. A great deal of attention across the countries is dedicated to the the Turkish Stream pipeline. Lukoil Neftochim, Gazprom Neft and Zarubezhneft control most of the oil trade in Bulgaria, Serbia and Republika Srpska respectively. This is done through the ownership of refining facilities and petrol stations. Gazprom Neft acquired a controlling stake in Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS) in early 2008, on the promise that Serbia would be included in South Stream. The purchase consolidated bilateral links at a time when Moscow came out strongly on the side of Belgrade in their fight against Kosovo's proclamation of independence.¹⁶ In Bosnia's Republika Srpska, Zarubezhneft bought the refineries at Bosanski Brod and Modrica in 2007

¹¹ The term “near abroad” in the Russians foreign policy refers to those states neighboring the Russian Federation which, until its collapse, formed part of the Soviet Union, as Union's Republics. More on this issue and how these states are perceived as Russia's foreign policy vital interest see in: Bohuslav Lither, ‘The Kozyrev Doctrine: a Russian Variation on the Monroe Doctrine’, in *Perspectives*, no. 4 – 1994/1995, pp.45-52.

¹² According to Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in South East Europe*, Yale University Press, 2017, pp.51-112.

¹³ Dimitar Bechev, “Russia in the Balkans: How should the EU respond”, Policy Brief – European Policy Center, October 2015, p.1.

¹⁴ Regulation (EU) No 833/2014, as amended.

¹⁵ Dušan Reljić, ‘The Impact of Russia’, in S. Lange, Z. Nechev and F. Trauner eds., *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, EUISS, Report no.36, 2017, pp. 43-51.; https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Western_Balkan_countries-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics .

¹⁶ More on this issue in: Dimitar Bechev, “Russia in the Balkans: How should the EU respond”, Policy Brief – European Policy Center, October 2015, p.2.

and the Banjaluka Petrol trading company in a direct deal rather than through a tender, and is seen as being close to Republika Srpska leader Milorad Dodik.¹⁷ Gazprom remains a monopoly supplier of gas to most countries in the region, with the exception of Greece, Romania and Croatia. As elsewhere in Europe, Russia uses the gas as a diplomatic tool. The main objective is political, rather than economic: to show that containment by the West is futile.¹⁸

After the “South Stream” project failed, mainly, because of the refusal of the Government of Bulgaria and the PM Borisov to continue Bulgarian participation in the project due to the Annexation of Crimea and the imposed Western sanctions on Russia, Russian President Putin found a new ally in the Turkish, then, PM and now President Erdogan that gave “new life” to the idea of Russian gas infiltration in the Balkans and Asia Minor. Russian Putin and Turkish Erdogan decided to change the route of the pipeline in the Black Sea, so that the pipeline wouldn’t have entry point to the region in Bulgaria on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, but in Turkey on the Turkish Black Sea coast. However, the core idea remained the same: to connect the states in the region to the Russian gas and to open the door for the Russian political penetration and influence in the region.¹⁹

Russia has become more vocal on Balkan political and security issues, notably in N. Macedonia and Bosnia. Russia is simply taking advantage of the loopholes in EU and NATO's policies. The slowdown of the NATO enlargement, as well as the EU enlargement has opened up opportunities for Russian policymakers to build additional leverage across the Balkans. According to Bechev, they have been scoring points in the overall tug-of-war with the West.²⁰

The population consisting of Serbs, Montenegrins and Slavic Macedonians in the Western Balkan countries share Slavic roots and the Orthodox religion with Russia. Therefore, memories of historic alliances with Russia continue to play an important role in the construction of their identities.²¹ The sense of belonging to the same Orthodox Slavic community was strongly emphasised during the last visit of Vladimir Putin in Belgrade, Serbia on 17th January, 2019.²² However, there are numerous ethnic minorities, such as the Hungarians and Albanians in Serbia, Albanians in N. Macedonia and Montenegro, which are from indifferent to openly opposed to the tales of historic and religious ties with Russia.²³ Also, many Orthodox Slavs in the region look sceptically at Russia, perceiving it as a great power whose actions, as demonstrated by a number of episodes that occurred in past centuries, were not always supportive of their goals. According to Reljić, this instrument of Russian influence in the Western Balkans was always more imagined than real.²⁴ Even in a country such as Serbia, where a majority of the population favours alliances with Russia and

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ For more on this issue see in: Arno Behrens, ‘The declared end of South Stream and why nobody seems to care’, CEPS Commentary, December 2014, available at: http://aei.pitt.edu/58193/1/AB_Southstream_Pipeline.pdf. (last accessed on: 01.05.2019).

²⁰ Dimitar Bechev, ‘Russia in the Balkans: How should the EU respond’, Policy Brief – European Policy Center, October 2015, p.2.

²¹ This is one of the three drivers of the Russian influence in the region according to Dušan Reljić, ‘The Impact of Russia’, in S. Lange, Z. Nechev and F. Trauner eds., *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, EUISS, Report no.36, 2017, pp. 43-51.

²² During the visit, the two heads of state visited the neo-Byzantine Saint Sava cathedral – see the NY Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/world/europe/serbia-putin-russia-belgrade-vucic.html>; Al Jazeera <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/belgrade-visit-putin-gift-vucic-190117201848733.html>. (last accessed on: 09.06.2019)

²³ Dušan Reljić, ‘The Impact of Russia’, in S. Lange, Z. Nechev and F. Trauner eds., *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, EUISS, Report no.36, 2017, pp. 43-51.

²⁴ Ibid.

overwhelmingly rejects NATO membership, support for joining the EU hovers at around 50%.²⁵

Russia is trying to exert its influence through funding of various news outlets and support of certain political parties, far-right movements and religious organisations in the region. By doing so, Russia is attempting to underestimate both NATO and EU's influence in the region. Under the umbrella of RT (formerly Russia Today), the Sputnik news agency opened an office in Belgrade in 2014.²⁶ The portal Russia Beyond the Headlines and the website *Ruska rec'*²⁷ receive more than a quarter of a million visitors daily.²⁸ The Russian 'worldview' is quite pervasive in mainstream media, as well, particularly in Serbia.²⁹ In Montenegro, there are 14 daily newspapers in Russian, while 5 new pro-Russian outlets were registered in 2017 alone.³⁰

IV. RUSSIA AND THE N. MACEDONIA

After N. Macedonia declared independence from the former Yugoslav federation in September 1991, Russia has only had marginal role in the processes that followed. Most notable Russian role was in 1992, when Russia recognized the newly formed country under its then constitutional name "Republic of Macedonia" and established diplomatic relations in 1994³¹. Due to the changed circumstances in the Russian foreign policy after the dissolution of the USSR, the then Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev and the lobbying of the then Bulgarian President Zhelev had the greatest influence among other factors that persuaded the then Russian President Yeltsin to make the move despite the strong Greek opposition.

In the years that followed, Russia was mostly silent regarding N. Macedonia, which is understandable having in mind the deep political and economic crisis of the Russian state and society in the 1990s. The only exception was the security crisis in 2001, between the State security forces and the Albanian insurgents. After a longer period, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued several statements supporting the "territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Macedonia" and pointing to the West for supporting "Kosovo as a source of instability for Republic of Macedonia".³² According to some diplomatic sources Russia had significant role in military assistance of the Macedonian security forces both in armament, but also training during the 2001 conflict. However, this information cannot be proved because of its being classified. The only proof is the massive purchases of arms and military equipment from Ukraine, which was at that point of time under Russian influence.³³

From that period on, Russia stuck to the normal diplomatic relations with N. Macedonia. That included intensified talks on economic cooperation (as an example – the

²⁵ Dušan Reljić, 'Russia Gives Serbia the Choice: Satellite or Bargaining Chip', in S. Fischer and M. Klein eds., *Conceivable Surprises – Eleven Possible Turns in Russian Foreign Policy*, SWP Research Paper, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2016, pp. 25-30.

²⁶ Marko Čeperković and Florence Gaub eds., *Balkan Futures: Three Scenarios for 2025*, Chaillot Paper no.147, 2018, p.22.

²⁷ More on: ruskarec.ru.

²⁸ The data is taken from - Marko Čeperković and Florence Gaub eds., *Balkan Futures: Three Scenarios for 2025*, Chaillot Paper no.147, 2018, p.22.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ http://mfa.gov.mk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=257&Itemid=398&lang=mk. (last accessed on: 09.06.2019)

³² For more info on this issue - www.mid.ru (last accessed on: 09.06.2019).

³³ See: <https://jamestown.org/program/ukraine-forges-military-alliance-with-macedonia/>; <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/ukraine-sells-helicopters-to-macedonia-8060.html>. (last accessed on: 09.06.2019).

LUKOIL investment³⁴), but also intensified cultural and educational cooperation.³⁵ When NATO failed to invite the country into its membership on the Bucharest Summit in 2008, because of the Greek veto, the Russian diplomacy did not comment the event directly, but it referred to its previously formed position on the name issue – that compromise between Skopje and Athens should be reached with United Nations mediation.³⁶

Since the vacuum was left with the N. Macedonia not becoming a NATO member, the country easily became target of the Russian rising influence which was mainly directed to oppose the West. Since the Crimean annexation in 2014, the Western Balkan countries, including the N. Macedonia became part of the Russian sphere of interest, trying to show the West that Russia can oppose their policies further than the former Soviet Union borders. Russia was especially vocal during the political crisis which started in 2015 in N. Macedonia.

During 2015 and 2016, the country has been living through one of the most dramatic and serious political crisis since its independence. Once a hopeful frontrunner in the EU accession process, during the 2015-2016 crisis N. Macedonia's score was nearing the low point of 2001, when violent ethnic conflict erupted in the country.³⁷ The crisis, triggered by the wiretapping scandal³⁸ revealed by the leader of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), Zoran Zaev, exposed the involvement of the then-Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski, and his closest allies from the then-ruling VMRO - DPMNE in massive scale electoral fraud, corruption, abuse of power and a score of other economic and violent offences. The dire conversations also confirmed the worries highlighted in the EU Commission's Progress Reports: the deep partisanship of state institutions and the judiciary, and the suppression of freedom of expression, which led the EU to define the situation in the country as "state capture"³⁹. The revelation of the wiretapped conversations actually started by an emergency press-conference during the weekend on 31st January 2015, by the then PM Gruevski, declaring that an attempted coup had been prevented, which was directly organised by the leader of the SDSM, the largest opposition party, as well as foreign secret services.⁴⁰ In the evening of the same day, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement supporting the claims of the then PM Gruevski that the wiretapping scandal was part of a bigger Western conspiracy.⁴¹

In the initial phase of the crisis, when the protestors poured onto the streets in Skopje in April 2015, calling for the resignation of Gruevski's government, Russian media accused the West of pushing for another revolution, while the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov

³⁴ For more info on this issue: <http://www.lukoil.com/Company/BusinessOperation/GeographicReach/Europe/lukoilnmacdonia> (last accessed on: 09.06.2019)

³⁵ For more info on this issue - www.mid.ru (last accessed on: 09.06.2019).

³⁶ More on this issue in: http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/mk/-/asset_publisher/Bx11WHR8ws3J/content/id/320662 (last accessed on: 09.06.2019).

³⁷ More on this issue in: Igor Bandović and Nikola Dimitrov, 'Balkan strongmen and fragile institutions, in S. Lange, Z. Nechev and F. Trauner eds., *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, EUISS, Report no.36, 2017, pp. 81-87.

³⁸ See: BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31332530>. (last accessed on: 15.04.2019)

³⁹ See: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-18-3405_en.htm (last accessed on: 15.04.2019).

⁴⁰ See: <https://www.dw.com/mk/%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%BE-2015-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0-334-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B0%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0/a-18950467> (last accessed on: 15.04.2019).

⁴¹ More on this issue: http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/mk/-/asset_publisher/Bx11WHR8ws3J/content/id/917223 (last accessed on: 15.04.2019).

clearly suggested that the crisis is orchestrated by the external factors – US and EU.⁴² After the armed clashes between security forces and Albanian terrorist group mostly infiltrated from Kosovo, in the city of Kumanovo on 9 and 10 May 2015, Russian Foreign Ministry pointed at the danger of creating “Greater Albania” and assessed the situation as notorious “colour revolution” scenario, which is fraught with grave consequences.⁴³

After an extensive international effort, mainly expressed through a partnership between US and EU representatives and diplomats, the so-called Przino agreement⁴⁴ was reached in June-July 2015. The four main political parties in the country agreed to negotiate and reach an agreement on the key structural reforms that will lead towards fair and democratic elections to put an end to the deep political crisis and start the process of rebuilding the Macedonian democracy. On the basis of this agreement, the Special Public Prosecutor’s office was established with a sole purpose of independently investigating and potentially indicting key political figures for the allegations of criminal offences revealed in the wiretaps.⁴⁵

The elections were finally held in December 2016 and were seen by many as the end of the crisis and the beginning of the transformation of the society, of bringing the country back on the right track and of the restoration of democratic governance and the rule of law. VMRO –DPMNE still had a very narrow lead, but was unable to form a government because it lacked the necessary number of seats to form a majority in Parliament. Their previous partner of ten years – the Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) as well as all the other parties representing the Albanian ethnic minority, refused to enter into a coalition with VMRO - DPMNE. One of the main reasons why they refused coalition was because VMRO – DPMNE wanted to abolish the Special Public Prosecutor’s office.

Instead of abiding by the Constitution and handing the mandate to the Parliamentary majority formed by the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) in coalition with three other Albanian bloc parties, the then President of the country, Gjorge Ivanov, refused to do this with rhetoric of protecting the country from future “Albanisation”. According to him⁴⁶, the essence of the so-called Tirana platform – declaration of the Albanian parties in Republic of Macedonia, is to change the constitutional order of the country.

It was clear that the peaceful transfer of government was not something that Gruevski was ready to do. Instead of change of government, what followed was the continuation of the crisis, finally escalating in violence. Although obstructed by their colleagues from VMRO – DPMNE, the new majority MPs, following the possibility given to them by the Parliament’s Rules of Procedure, elected the new Speaker of the Parliament, Mr. Talat Xaferi, in the late afternoon on April 27th 2017. They were aware that this move might be harmful for their own security, since the VMRO – DPMNE leader has called for his membership several times to be on high alert to defend their country from the “traitors” from SDSM. The political earthquake that happened seemed to be inevitable. On the night of April 27th we witnessed the horrifying scenes⁴⁷ of dragging one of the MPs covered in blood through the hallways of the Macedonian Parliament, the horrifying scenes of blooding up the new majority leader Zoran

⁴² More on this issue in: http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/1299386 (last accessed on: 15.04.2019).

⁴³ More on this issue in: http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/mk/-/asset_publisher/Bx11WHR8ws3J/content/id/1257608.

⁴⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/news_corner/news/news-files/20150619_agreement.pdf. (last accessed on: 15.04.2019)

⁴⁵ Brsakoska Bazerkoska J., *The EU and Macedonia’s political crisis – another date with history?*, EPIN Commentary, no.23, July 2015.

⁴⁶ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/04/07/ivanov-essence-of-tirana-platform-is-to-change-constitutional-order/>. (last accessed on: 15.04.2019)

⁴⁷ <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/04/27/macedonia-elects-parliament-speaker-amid-ongoing-tension-04-27-2017-1/>. (last accessed on: 15.04.2019)

Zaev, other MPs and also journalists. Only several minutes after the announcement of the election of Macedonia's new Parliament Speaker, supporters of the VMRO - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO –DPMNE) stormed into the Parliament's building. One would believe that one of the most important institutions in the country and the people's representatives working there would be best protected against any attack from outsiders. On the contrary, on the night of April 27th we witnessed what we thought was impossible to happen. It took more than two hours for the police to react. They eventually intervened to end the protests and to evacuate the MPs and journalists that were stuck inside the Parliament's building, but did not manage to prevent the violence that left the bitter aftertaste and the feeling of insecurity and possibility for further escalation.⁴⁸

Although the events on the April 27th are without any doubt orchestrated by the structures connected to Gruevski and his clique, the Russian Foreign Ministry, had a completely different view of the situation, presenting "parallel truth" by ignoring the facts, most of which were directly televised. In the Russian Foreign Ministry's Press release, issued on the following day, the situation was summed up as the attempt of the opposition that lost the parliamentary election to seize power in the country by electing the Speaker of the Assembly by force on its own initiative and in violation of established procedures.⁴⁹ The Russians accused the "official representatives of the European Union, the ambassadors of some European countries and the ambassador of the United States for unhesitatingly praising the new "Parliament speaker" who is, incidentally, a former field commander in the so-called pro-Albanian National Liberation Army".⁵⁰ The failure of the Ministry of interior to react in a swiftly manner was praised as a "well-coordinated and quick response, doubtless, attests to the fact that these developments had been planned in advance, with the covert connivance of "foreign curators" of the Macedonian opposition".⁵¹ Finally, they concluded that the "attempts to change the country on the basis of the so-called "Tirana platform" are fraught with even greater risk, and the situation might escalate into a conflict, including an inter-ethnic conflict".⁵²

After the new Government was finally formed on June 1st 2017, the name issue negotiations were back on the agenda, followed by intensified contacts and negotiations between the parties under the auspices of the UN mediator Niemitz. The dispute was finally resolved after long and hard negotiations by signing the "Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences as Described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the Termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the Establishment of the Strategic Partnership Between the Parties", known as "Prespa Agreement"⁵³ according to the geographic area of the Prespa lake, bordering region between Macedonia and Greece, on 17.06.2018. According to the Agreement, the official name of Macedonia was changed to Republic of North Macedonia or North Macedonia, Macedonian language as official language of North Macedonia refers to the South Slavic family of languages and Macedonian history for Greece is the antique Hellenic civilization and for North Macedonia its slavic heritage. Greece is obliged to refrain from vetoing the membership of North Macedonia in international organization, including NATO and the EU. N. Macedonia, after holding a

⁴⁸ Brsakoska Bazerkoska J., *Balkan Schrodinger's Cat: the Case of Macedonian Democracy*, E-International Relations, 12.05.2017, available at: <http://www.e-ir.info/2017/05/12/balkan-schrodingers-cat-the-case-of-macedonian-democracy/> (last accessed on: 15.04.2019)

⁴⁹ http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/mk/-/asset_publisher/Bx11WHr8ws3J/content/id/2739769 (last accessed on: 15.04.2019)

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ The full text of the "Prespa Agreement" available at: <https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/spogodbaben.pdf> (last accessed on: 09.06.2019).

consultative referendum and ratifying the Agreement in the Parliament, made the necessary constitutional amendments in January 2019 and Greece, after receiving a notification that Macedonia implemented the amendments, ratified the Agreement as well. The ratification cleared the path for future N. Macedonia to sign the Protocol for membership in NATO and after the ratification of the Protocol by all NATO member states to become the 30th member state of NATO.⁵⁴

While these developments took place in the country, the Russian reactions were mainly connected with their concerns of the “negative consequences for regional security and bilateral relations”⁵⁵ from the future membership of N. Macedonia into NATO. It is worth noting that Russia officially retreating from its previous position that any mutually acceptable solution to the name issue between Greece and N. Macedonia is acceptable for Russia. The reason for that changing position is because Russia looked at the Prespa Agreement only through the lenses of the future NATO enlargement in the Western Balkans. This conclusion is confirmed by further Russian reactions on the referendum that was held on September 30th in N. Macedonia. Contrary to its often stressed principle of non-interference in the internal affairs, Russia extensively commented purely internal issue – such as the referendum on constitutional changes.⁵⁶

Moreover, the Prespa Agreement was incitement for a Greek-Russian diplomatic dispute over activities undertaken by Russian diplomats⁵⁷ and a Greek businessman with Russian origin⁵⁸, related to undermining the implementation of the Prespa Agreement.

Despite its strong opposition to Prespa Agreement, after the process was completed in both countries, Russia without any further comments, accepted the new name – Republic of North Macedonia for both bilateral and multilateral purposes.⁵⁹

V. CONCLUSIONS

The history of the relations between Russia and N. Macedonia after the Macedonian independence in 1991 shows that bilateral relations are always determined by broader processes happening in Russia and that Russia did not have and does not have any specific approach to N. Macedonia outside of its general political orientation and its regional approach. In the beginning of the 1990s, the affirmative attitude of Russia towards the independence of N. Macedonia can be understood only as a reflection of the general pro-Western Russian foreign policy in the years from 1992 to 1994. The Russian involvement in the security crisis in N. Macedonia in 2001 is a reflection of both the Russian “diplomatic awakening” after President Putin came to power in the year 2000 and the Russian strategy to oppose the West in the Balkans following the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, the NATO military presence in Kosovo after the Kumanovo Agreement between Miloshević and NATO, and the Western plans for further expansion of NATO in the Balkans.

⁵⁴ Samuli Sinisalo and Aleksandar Spasov, *Finnish EU Presidency and the Enlargement in the Western Balkans*, Kalevi Sorsa Foundation, 2019

⁵⁵ http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/mk/-/asset_publisher/Bx11WHR8ws3J/content/id/3131596 (last accessed on: 09.06.2019).

⁵⁶ http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/mk/-/asset_publisher/Bx11WHR8ws3J/content/id/3363368 (last accessed on: 09.06.2019).

⁵⁷ See The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/11/greece-to-expel-russian-diplomats-over-alleged-macedonia-interference> (last accessed on: 09.06.2019).

⁵⁸ See: <https://www.pappaspost.com/fyrom-officials-suspect-greek-russian-billionaire-paid-for-violent-anti-nato-protests/> (last accessed on: 09.06.2019).

⁵⁹ https://macedonia.mid.ru/web/macedonia_mc, <https://lider.com.mk/makedonija/dokumenti-rusija-vekje-nepriznava-kako-severna-makedonija-ambasadorot-so-radost-gi-odnese-notite/> (last accessed on: 09.06.2019).

The failure of NATO to complete the process of enlargement with N. Macedonia during the Bucharest Summit in 2008 could have only be understood by Moscow as weakness of the Western politics and as an incentive for more aggressive approach. The political and institutional crisis that started in N. Macedonia in 2001 was perceived by Moscow as the first important opportunity to show their new role and strength in the Balkans into practice. Having in mind that EU and the West tolerated Gruevski's authoritarian practices for a longer period of time before 2015 hoping that Gruevski will eventually find a solution to the name dispute, Russia may have concluded that the West has weakened its leverage in N. Macedonia and used its chance. Moscow's reactions to the efforts to find a solution both for the political and institutional crisis in N. Macedonia and the longstanding name dispute between Macedonia and Greece, undoubtedly show that the sole strategy of Moscow was to weaken the Western influence, to incite conflicts that will disturb the Western institutions and to eventually halt the further enlargement of NATO and EU. The Russian acceptance of the Prespa Agreement after the processes in both countries were finished, only shows that the main concern of Russia is not the wellbeing of the country and the people of N. Macedonia, but rather the larger geopolitical context where N. Macedonia and its people are only a side player in a temporarily battlefield.

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