

A threshold for European aspirations. NATO membership. 2008.

At a meeting with NATO Secretary General, Mr. Jaap D.H. Scheffer, former Macedonian Prime Minister, Vlado Buckovski, talking about the NATO demands for 110% fair elections in Macedonia, said: "Secretary General, you're asking for miracles. But I accept the miracle."¹. This is a regular political joke, especially since the elections of July 2006 were not exactly "110% fair". Yet, this statement is also indicative from another perspective – it speaks about the political discourse in Macedonia, how things are perceived, referred to and understood. Thus, it seems rather ironic, if unsurprising, that the Macedonian discourse about NATO should revolve around 'miracles' – demanding or accepting them. NATO officials have continually emphasized the 'rational' nature of NATO, its enlargement and the criteria for enlargement. There should be nothing miraculous about them! When a state is ready, when all necessary reforms and preparations in the defence and political sectors have been completed, it receives an invitation for NATO membership. In the meantime, NATO evaluates the progress of reforms and provides guidelines and recommendations. It is as simple as that.

¹ Press Point by the Prime Minister of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Vlado Buckovski and NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. 22 March, 2006. NATO Online Library. Available at: <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2006/s060322a.htm>

This brief looks at recent political discourses in Macedonia, focusing on NATO and Macedonian prospective membership in the Alliance. In the face of the government's NATO integration efforts, this article outlines how the image of NATO interacts with integration efforts of the government and the integration measures that NATO takes towards Macedonia. The brief notes that NATO discourse in Macedonia is predominantly symbolic, revolving around an appealing and romanticized image of NATO that Macedonians (population at large as well as political elites) entertain. Such discourse (along with extremely high levels of public support for NATO membership) is emblematic of societies in early stages of integration. Thus, today, when Macedonia is expecting to receive a membership invitation on the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, those discourses could become damaging - distracting public attention from necessary reforms and rendering the population ignorant of the real reforms needed for securing NATO membership. Instead, the positive image of NATO must be employed towards furthering and accelerating the reforms.

12 years of partnership

In 1995, Macedonia joined the Partnership for Peace, the institutional tool NATO devised for closer cooperation with Eastern European states. It was the beginning of the long road to joining NATO - a distant destination with a lot of other states already far ahead of Macedonia. In the following twelve years, NATO was always present on the political agenda and public discourse in Macedonia. The international political developments along with the reverberations on the domestic political scene shaped the image of NATO. How Macedonians perceive NATO determines their willingness to support (often painful) reforms and to bear the costs of NATO membership.

We argue that both NATO and the Macedonian government should take advantage of the overwhelming public support for NATO - the government by implementing reforms and NATO by strengthening democracy by inviting Macedonia to join.

Public Opinion in consensus

Due to its recent statehood and even more recent challenges to it, NATO membership is primarily seen as a **guarantee for the territorial integrity of Macedonia**. Almost seventeen years after proclaiming independence some in Macedonia still fear for its integrity and survival. The border with Kosovo is not yet demarcated and at points disputed, while after the ethnic conflict in 2001 the institutions' weakness also became apparent. Considering the region's volatility and still fluid borders, those fears are not entirely groundless. In this context, NATO membership is seen as a guarantee for the security and territorial integrity of the Macedonian state, while also as a kind of prevention against internal inter-ethnic conflicts.

For a small, relatively poor state with marginal influence on international affairs, membership in a powerful and elite organization, such as NATO, is understandably very attractive. Yet, NATO does not only symbolize power. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has come to **embody democratic norms and values of Europe, and the West** in general, towards which Macedonia strives. Being a NATO member would give Macedonia/ns a sense of belonging to a greater community, but more importantly, a prestigious community, one that would improve the self-image of Macedonians and that would reinforce the European/Western component of their identity.

Another dominant way of perceiving NATO among Macedonians is as a **preparatory stage for EU membership**. EU membership, with the associated numerous tangible financial and political benefits, is the ultimate strategic goal of the states from the Southeast European region. Seeing NATO as EU's entrée is not very unusual as NATO and EU are often discursively linked - the reference 'Euro-Atlantic' being used for both organizations as well as the integration efforts of Eastern European states. Empirically, as well, most (not all) states that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 have previously become NATO members. Thus,

although NATO membership is not a guarantee for EU membership, not being invited to join NATO almost certainly means not joining the EU. Therefore, joining NATO is very important in the minds of Macedonians - as a step closer to EU membership and an additional evidence to be presented to the EU of Macedonia's suitability for the start of the accession talks.

The above components of the Macedonian discourse on NATO contribute well to understanding why NATO membership has such great public support. The discourse shows that NATO membership is perceived in rather symbolic terms – as evidence of Macedonia's belonging to Europe and achieving desired levels of security, wealth and international respect (as a member of one of the most powerful and prestigious organizations). Clearly, NATO membership contributes to an improved self-image of Macedonians. Yet, reforms are truly needed before Macedonia can be ready to join NATO.

The Macedonian Government in action (?)

The image of NATO outlined above can influence government actions in two ways. First, the positive image of NATO among the population and the extensive support for joining NATO oblige the government to do its best to achieve this goal. Therefore, the government should speed up the pace of reforms and invest efforts into fulfilling the other requirements set by NATO as prerequisites for membership. This would imply swift reaction in all fields outlined by NATO officials:

- Promoting and improving the political dialogue between the government and opposition parties (an act that has been recently enhanced with the agreement reached between the oppositional Democratic Union of Integration and that of the governing VMRO-DPMNE).
- Enhancing the fight against organized crime, corruption, trafficking.
- Accelerating reforms of the police and the judiciary.
- Continuing with the decentralization process and associated reforms (fiscal reforms, minority language use etc.).

Second, the high levels of public support for NATO membership establish a favourable climate for conducting reforms. Even though some of the necessary reforms may be expensive or painful for the population (restructuring and layoff of civil servants in the security sector) if undertaken in the name of a popular cause, the reforms will be better accepted and supported by the population. This is an additional incentive for the government to make use of the momentum and to proceed with the reforms in order to earn an invitation for NATO membership as soon as possible.

As NATO membership is set as a strategic foreign policy objective for Macedonia, factional political interests, as seen with the agreement reached on 29 May 2007, have been set aside. The government has been able to reach a consensus with oppositional political parties concerning various issues that have dominated recent political agendas of the country. This achievement is especially important in the present situation when there is a tight schedule and little time left before the next enlargement summit in Bucharest in February 2008.

The government, on the other hand, must abandon the symbolic rhetoric and introduce a more rational discourse regarding NATO membership. The necessity of reforms and commitment of additional resources must be made clear to the public. Considering the high popular support for NATO membership, it would not be an overly unpopular move. If indeed Macedonia is likely to receive an invitation by NATO on the next enlargement summit in 2008, it is very timely to introduce needed reforms and thus secure membership. Promising and believing in miracles would not suffice.

NATO willing to enlarge (?)

The image of NATO presented above must not be neglected by NATO as well. Against the background of re-inventing its identity, from a military alliance to a value-based community, NATO should not make moves that would spoil its image and disillusion the population in Macedonia. Considering that NATO is seen as a community of European/Western democratic values, NATO membership would contribute to spreading the area of security and democracy to the Western Balkans, which is in the interest of both the Western Balkan states and NATO. Further delays or eventual rejection of membership applications may cause disappointment and resentment, which could also backfire on the pace and support for reforms.

Another important element of NATO membership is the military involvement of the Macedonian Army in NATO missions and operations world-wide. Being a candidate country for NATO membership, Macedonia has taken part and supported NATO military and peace missions across the world, including Afghanistan and Iraq. This shows commitment to the cause of NATO and a willingness to participate and learn the methods and practices of NATO missions. It vouches for Macedonia's serious intentions regarding NATO as well as for its readiness to undertake the responsibilities of NATO membership. In a period when a lot of states are withdrawing their troops from Iraq and other dangerous areas, Macedonia's commitment should be taken to its credit.

Kosovo and the 1999 NATO campaign against Yugoslavia must also be taken into consideration by NATO when deciding on whether to invite Macedonia to NATO. The government allowed NATO to use Macedonian territory and airspace during the intervention against the Milosevic-led Belgrade regime and Macedonia hosted about 200,000 refugees from Kosovo. By 'doing NATO a favour' and assisting the resolution of the conflict in Kosovo, Macedonians expected the good gesture to be remembered by the Alliance and repaid soon. There was a growing

belief that by 'helping' NATO Macedonia deserved favourable treatment and a quicker route to NATO membership. What Macedonia did in 1999 is often mentioned by Macedonian politicians as a credit towards NATO membership. Such expectations further distracted the focus from necessary reforms. Yet, while insisting on further reforms and adherence to the formal membership criteria, NATO must also send a clear signal that it would not forget the states that assisted its actions. Inviting Macedonia to join the Alliance would prove NATO's reliability and solidarity, thus enhancing the positive image that Macedonians have of NATO.

By inviting Macedonia to become a member, NATO would contribute to the materialization of all the above expectations and perceptions. In the eyes of most Macedonians NATO membership would mean being closer to the EU, being safer from threats to internal security and territorial integrity, and also being recognized as a 'truly European', democratic state. This, in turn, would establish positive momentum for further reforms and a virtuous circle for reforms and change.