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MACEDONIA- RUSSIA'S NEW PLAYGROUND IN THE BALKANS

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commentary

IT IS just with recent events in Macedonia (the 9/10 May Kumanovo police action and anti-government protests in the city of Skopje) that Russia became so vocal in backing current leadership in Skopje. Official Moscow has provided clear support to the police action in Kumanovo while describing the anti-government rally in Skopje as organised by West-inspired NGOs that follow the “color revolution” scenario in Macedonia.

It is very difficult to assess the sudden Russian great interest in Macedonia. Plethora of statements were coming from official Moscow, several times a week, something which we have not been used to see in the past. This can be overwhelming for a small country as Macedonia. For example before January 2015 Russia’s MFA has not issued a single statement on Macedonia since the post-armed conflict years in the early 2000s.

Primarily Russia’s support to the current leadership in Skopje can be seen as a result of official Moscow trying to foster its foreign policy objectives in Europe. Most

2015	Excerpts from Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements on Macedonia
January 31 Wiretapping scandal	“Macedonian law enforcement agencies reported that an attempted coup had been prevented. According to top national officials, the abortive coup was directly organised by the leader of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, the largest opposition party, as well as foreign secret services.”
April 22 Gosince police station incident	“The incident on the Macedonian border is proof of the lingering sharp ethnic problems and conflict potential in that part of the Balkans. The situation is made worse by a major lack of law abidance and security in Kosovo, which obviously stems from the unresolved Kosovo problem in general.”
May 09 Kumanovo police action	“A number of opposition movements and largely West-inspired NGOs have chosen to follow the logic of the streets and the notorious “color revolution” scenario, which is fraught with grave consequences.”
May 16 Anti-Gov Protests	“The situation in Macedonia is being led to a “color revolution,” the West has launched plans to do so. “
2014,2013 2012, 2011 2010 ...	No statements

of the statements we have seen are attempts to promote Russia’s position on Ukraine. For example among its first statements in January Russia highlighted the need for adopting a resolution which would prohibit unconstitutional

coups under the OSCE framework. As such it was given in the context when the main opposition party SDSM started with revelations of the wiretapped materials. This was a clear example for fostering its foreign policy objectives. Ad-

ditional example can be seen in maintaining and reinforcing its non-recognition position on Kosovo by describing it in one of its statements as an unresolved issue where there is a “lack of law abidance and security” pointing the finger towards Pristina as a source of instability in the region.

Another take can be also Russia’s long-awaited vision to expand its energy policy in the Balkans and Central Europe by circumventing Ukraine through the building of the so called Turkish Stream. Some initial routes have suggested that the pipelines should go through Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary. The current leadership in Skopje has been favourable of the idea and Russia needs stable political and security climate in the countries where pipelines should transit.

Apart from the official channels like Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its Embassies, Macedonia has been exposed heavily to Russia’s propaganda machinery pushing mainly disinformation of speculative character something that reinforces its already enhanced approach to Macedonia. Not being confronted with the sophisticated Russian propaganda before, media in Macedonia use the sensationalism and further disseminate them among the public. Being exposed to this kind of misinformation, in the medium run, might influence the Macedonian public where the vast majority of the population considers NATO and EU Enlargement as main priority.

Russia is not shy in projecting its goals and objectives in the Balkans anymore. Unfortunately we

witness how it is using currently what appears to be societies in fragile position like Macedonia and Republika Srpska as well as keep pushing forward its agenda with Serbia through high level (political-economic-military) visits taking place regularly. At this moment these are Russia’s three main entry points for promoting its policies in the Western Balkans. It will continue using mixture of economic and political instruments (e.g. Turkish Stream and political support for the leadership in Republika Srpska – BiH and Macedonia). In absence of real progress of the Euro-Atlantic integrations of the region such an agenda can be pushed forward very easily. Brussels and Washington should take Russia’s renewed engagement in the Western Balkans as a wake up call. □



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