

Macedonia – back in the global spotlight

Andreja Bogdanovski

What has brought Macedonia back into the global spotlight? Basically: the police operation in Kumanovo, 9 and 10 May 2015, which catapulted Macedonia into media headlines around the world. This large-scale operation against what officials identified as a terrorist group (partly infiltrating from Kosovo) ignited fears of fresh internal ethnic clashes like those of 2001, when Macedonian security forces were fighting ethnic Albanian rebels. In 2001 the country was on the verge of a civil war, which was prevented thanks to the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, ultimately a power-sharing agreement. The concern in 2015 has been whether inter-ethnic clashes might erupt again.

The situation is highly complex. Macedonia has been involved in a serious political crisis which culminated in the release of wiretapping material by the main opposition party SDSM¹ in February 2015, with compelling evidence of the misuse of public positions by high government officials: election fraud, corruption, murder cover-up, and more. The wide extent of the wiretapping, which according to the SDSM had been conducted by the ruling VMRO-DPMNE,² was alleged to have involved more than 20,000 persons from various walks of life, ranging from politicians and high government officials, to religious leaders, civil society activists, and others.

These two incidents – the wiretapping, and the police clamp-down – are but the tip of the iceberg. Macedonia, once the Western Balkan frontrunner as regards EU and NATO accession, has become one of the laggards in the region. Take, for instance, the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, which involves provisions for future EU membership of countries of the Western Balkans. Macedonia was the first to sign

such an agreement, back in 2001. On 1 June 2015 there was a celebratory atmosphere in Sarajevo when the Stabilisation and Association agreement signed by Bosnia and Herzegovina came into force. Compared with Macedonia we are looking at a time-lag of more than a decade. Yet Macedonia is still not a member of the EU or NATO – and although Macedonia signed its Stabilisation and Association Agreement before Croatia, that country was admitted to the EU in 2013.

There are many factors contributing to the diminished position of Macedonia, internationally as well as at home, especially important have been the country's stalemated Euro-Atlantic integration efforts, as well as the democratic backslide. In fact, these two processes are interlinked and feed into each other. The halt in Euro-Atlantic integration has been seen as resulting primarily from the Greek veto on Macedonia joining the EU and NATO. Ever since 2008, when the Greek authorities vetoed Macedonia's accession to NATO at the Bucharest Summit, they have also blocked Macedonia's accession negotiations with the EU, despite the EU Commission's recommendations for the country to move forward with the process as the next step of the enlargement process. As a result, the EU Council and other EU institutions have their hands tied when it comes to producing any kind of greater engagement with Macedonia.

The enlargement policy, based on fair principles and clear benchmarks, is the EU's strongest carrot and stick for encouraging changes in aspirant countries, including Macedonia. This well-known formula has worked in Central and most of Eastern Europe, but in the case of Macedonia it faces a considerable problem.

The carrot/stick approach cannot be deployed effectively because of the name dispute between Macedonia and Greece, which has been dragging on for more than 20 years, still causing serious headaches not only in Macedonia and the region but in Brussels as well. According to Athens, the root of the problem

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1 SDSM: Social Democratic Union of Macedonia.

2 VMRO-DPMNE - Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

lies in ‘irredentist’ policies adopted in Skopje with regard to the historic region of Macedonia. This view is dismissed as absurd in Macedonia’s capital Skopje; on that side of the border, the problem is seen in terms of Greece’s negation of Macedonian identity markers like language, culture and history. Official mediation efforts by the UN have failed to yield concrete results. The blockage of Macedonia’s EU path creates frustrations among the populace: what is the point in the Commission’s recommendations for negotiations on accession if this is not realistic? EU fatigue fuelled by government propaganda through state-controlled media has weakened public support for Macedonia’s accession to the EU.

On the other hand, the lack of concrete movement in the EU enlargement process, and of an effective carrot-and-stick policy towards Macedonia, has made the ruling political elite comfortable with the status quo. While the government in Skopje deserves some credit for its commitment to making Macedonia a more favourable environment for foreign investment, and improving the economy overall, there have been doubts about the negative track record on democratic reform and actual backsliding in this respect. Take, for example, the Reporters Without Borders media freedoms scorecard: from being ranked in 34th position in 2009, the situation in Macedonia has dramatically worsened, resulting in a ranking of no. 117 in 2015 – the lowest in the region.³ Freedom House in its 2015 report has also downgraded the political rights score for Macedonia (from 3 to 4), describing it as a ‘partly-free’ state.⁴

Wiretapping scandal

The tipping point to the political crisis in Macedonia came in February 2015 when the main opposition party, SDSM, started leaking, on a weekly basis, wiretapped material of high government officials alleged to be involved in criminal activities. SDSM’s leader, Zoran Zaev, has claimed that the party in power intentionally and illegally wiretapped more than 20,000 Macedonian citizens over a period of several years. He points the finger especially at VMRO’s power figure and former chief of counterintelligence, Saso Mijalkov, whom he asserts was responsible for this massive illegal surveillance programme. The ruling VMRO-DPMNE party, however, has accused the opposition leader of collaborating with foreign intelligence services and people from the Ministry of Interior for the wiretapped material, describing this as coup-d’état attempt. So far there no information has been published as to the identity or identities of the foreign intelligence services said to be behind such wiretapping.

Months after the revelations started, the International Republican Institute conducted an opinion poll about Macedonia’s political landscape. The high support previously enjoyed by VMRO-DPMNE (December 2014: 26%), has gone down (July 2015: 23%), while support for SDSM grew by 1%, leading to 11%.⁵ The scandalous content of the revelations have helped

the main opposition party to make a comeback, grabbing public attention as well as media attention. Citing setbacks to democracy as the reason, the SDSM has boycotted activity in the Parliament, and after the April 2014 elections decided to function outside of it, refusing to recognize the election results, which it says have been falsified.

What may appear to be an unfortunate decision by the SDSM can be interpreted as a reaction to its perceptions that the political playing field between the party in power and the opposition is not a level one. To illustrate the difficulties the opposition party had in communicating its message to the public we need look no further than SDSM press conferences where, due to political control of the media, the most influential media did not attend, and the opposition could not get its message across. As the SDSM leader revealed leaked materials of high-level officials, interest in the revelations became increasingly intense. The content became a major mobilizing factor behind the accumulated protest amongst the public that finally took to the streets of Skopje. Every afternoon at around 6 PM for several weeks, protesters, including civil society activists, gathered in front of the government building to express their dissatisfaction with the ruling party and demanding major changes. These culminated in the protest on the 17 May where several thousand people from across the country demanded the resignation of the current leadership. The protests were rich in symbolism: apart from the sheer numbers involved, they also demonstrated the mobilization of people from different ethnic and social backgrounds who would otherwise rarely come together, given the extreme ethnic polarization of Macedonian society.

The international community, represented through various embassies in Skopje, decided to exercise political pressure on the government as well as the opposition party, by asking for more concrete action regarding what the leaked materials had revealed. The very next day, the Prime Minister instructed three central figures in the leaked material – the Minister of Interior, the Counterintelligence Chief and the Minister for Transport and Communications – to resign, as they duly did shortly afterwards. This was followed by the embassies holding talks with SDSM members, who were urged to return to the Parliament.

As a result of mediation efforts by the European Commission and the European Parliament, supported by the USA, a deal between the ruling and opposition parties was reached, aimed at leading to early elections in April 2016. A transitional period of several months is to pave the way for the elections. Points in the deal include:

- A new government is to be sworn by 15 January 2016. The government will be led by VMRO-DPMNE appointee whose functions would be limited to organizing elections in April. This is a systematic solution to be practised with every general election.
- The main opposition party SDSM will return to the Parliament by 1st September 2015.
- By 20 October 2015, SDSM is to appoint a new Minister of the Interior, after consulting the ruling parties; likewise

³ Reporters Without Borders, 2015 World Press Freedom Index: <https://index.rsf.org/#!/index-details>.

⁴ Freedom House Report 2015 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/macedonia#VdWDkrTfLww>

⁵ IRI: Survey of Macedonian public opinion. http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2014%20September%2026%20Survey%20of%20Macedonian%20Public%20Opinion%2C%20August%2029-September%205%2C%202014-English_0.pdf

as regards a new Minister of Labour, deputy ministers of Finance, Agriculture, and Information Society and Administration. The deputy ministers will have veto rights.

- By 15 September 2015, the appointment of a Special Prosecutor, who will be in charge of dealing with the wire-tapping scandal.

Implementation technicalities remain highly polarizing, and may have the potential to plunge Macedonia into deeper political crises.

Macedonia's security challenges – Kumanovo

The political instability in the country was followed by a deteriorating security situation. Once again, Macedonia was confronted by a security challenge that, unless managed well, could have been explosive both for Macedonia and the region as a whole.

In the course of only a few weeks several things happened. An incident in the border region with Kosovo occurred when gunmen attacked the local police station. Shortly afterwards, on 9 May, a major police action was mounted in the northern city of Kumanovo, close to the Kosovo-Serbia border. Macedonian police initiated a police action seeking to detain an armed group which, according to official sources, planned attacks on strategic targets in Macedonia. The operation as such alarmed the entire region. Neighbouring Serbia, Kosovo and Bulgaria increased their alertness levels and beefed up security along their borders with Macedonia. Officials have stated that some members of the group in question had fought in the wars that swept across the region in the 1990s and that some had been fighting in the Middle East. The police action resulted in 18 dead (10 gunmen, 8 policemen). More than 30 police officers were injured during the 30-hour-long exchange of fire.

One of the most debated questions regarding the shootings in Kumanovo, frequently raised in the national and international media, concerned the timing of this police action. It occurred against the backdrop of one of the most difficult political crisis in the history of the country, and only one week before an announced massive anti-government rally.

Many went even indicating that this might have been a government-planned event aimed at deflecting public attention away from the compromising materials which the SDSM had been leaking to the public, revealing fraud and corruption on the part of high government officials. According to this theory, the Kumanovo incident was intended to diminish the importance of the leaked materials and foster support for the government in its policies for re-establishing law and order in the country. This theory has been widely speculated about, not only in Macedonia but throughout in the region as well. Speculations were further inflamed by a press conference held by the Macedonian President focusing on the Kumanovo event, when he publically stated that state institutions and he personally had been informed about the existence of the group early in 2015 in turn leading to the question: why were these people allowed to infiltrate from neighbouring Kosovo? Even more importantly, why had

the authorities allowed such a period to pass, permitting infiltration in such a densely populated area as the city of Kumanovo? Moreover, the president added that some of the gunmen had been fighting in the Middle East.

Of course such a theory remains only a theory. The actual magnitude of the operation, the number of casualties reported and the regional repercussions of the shootings in Kumanovo may point to the genuineness of the government's position. It is still too early to know, as the Macedonian Ministry of Internal Affairs has not shared many details with the public; however, there is an ongoing investigation which is intended to provide further details.

The Kumanovo incident, for good or bad, may have provided a signal to authorities across the region, as well as the international community, to be wary of the deadly cocktail that results when mixing whatever the ideology of foreign fighters may be with notions of ethno-nationalism. This can prove to be a recipe for fast-tracking radicalization across the Western Balkans. If that should come to pass, then we would not be talking about lone actors, but well-organized groups. That would make current efforts of the authorities across the Western Balkans aimed at solving the challenges posed by the foreign-fighter threat extremely difficult; and inflating the ethno-nationalistic element of the dilemma would hinder regional cooperation on security issues. The moment ethno-politics enters the equation of how intelligence services, police and other relevant actors are to conduct their work, the entire response of the security system may become endangered. A security vacuum, open to exploitation by radical groups to vast effect, could then emerge.

Russia expanding its influence in the Balkans

The political, administrative and security fragility of Macedonia has smoothed the way for the entry of Russian influence as a way of expanding the current influence Russia already has in the region, primarily through Serbia. With the recent events in Macedonia (the Kumanovo police action; anti-government protests in Skopje), Russia has become particularly vocal in backing the current leadership in Skopje. As regards Kumanovo, Kremlin provided clear support to the police action; with the protests it held that the protests in Skopje were organized by Western-inspired NGOs seeking to follow the 'colour revolution' scenario in Macedonia.⁶

It is very difficult to assess the sudden upsurge of interest in Macedonia. Statement after statement has been coming from Moscow, several times a week – definitely a new departure.⁷ This can prove overwhelming for a small country like Macedonia. For example, until January 2015 the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had not issued a single statement on Macedonia after the post-armed conflict years of the early 2000s.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation <http://archive.mid.ru/bdomp/ns-reuro.nsf/348bd0da1d5a7185432569e700419c7a/44257b100055ec1543257e4000407da2!OpenDocument> (in Russian).

⁷ List of statements made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation available here: <http://archive.mid.ru/bdomp/ns-reuro.nsf!OpenDatabase&Start=16&Count=30&Expand=26> (in Russian).

Russia's support to the current leadership in Skopje can be seen primarily as a result of the Kremlin trying to promote its foreign policy objectives in Europe. Most of the statements can be seen as attempts to promote Russia's position on Ukraine. For instance, among its first statements in January/February, Russia highlighted the need for adopting a resolution which would prohibit unconstitutional coups under the OSCE framework, clearly supporting Gruevski's position on the wiretapping scandal.⁸ This is a clear example of Russia seeking to promote its own foreign policy objectives. An additional example can be seen in the maintenance and reinforcement of the Kremlin's non-recognition position on Kosovo: the matter is described as an unresolved issue where there is a 'lack of law abidance and security', referring to the 22 April 2015 incident at Gošince on the Macedonia-Kosovo border.⁹ Another factor can be Russia's vision of expanding its energy policy in the Balkans and Central Europe, circumventing transit through Ukraine by building the 'Turkish Stream'. Some initially proposed routes have involved crossing Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary. The current Macedonian leadership has been favourable to the idea, and Russia will need a stable political and security climate in the countries through which the pipeline would transit.

Apart from official channels such as Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and embassies, Macedonia has been heavily exposed to the Kremlin propaganda machinery, which has been providing disinformation of a speculative character.

Unfamiliar with sophisticated Russian propaganda, the media in Macedonia have picked up on the sensationalism in stories on Macedonia and further disseminated it among the public. Exposure to this kind of misinformation will influence the Macedonian public, at least in the medium term. That being said, it is worth noting that vast majority of the population continues to view NATO and EU Enlargement as a main priority for their country's future.

Conclusions

Macedonia finds itself at a crossroads once again. Internally it has experienced democracy backsliding, intensified with the blockage by Greece of Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic path. A country that was once at the front of the queue now is among the last. Precious time has been lost in trying to circumvent the Greek veto, but all attempts have failed, because there has been no real movement on resolving the name issue. On the international stage, Macedonia has lost sympathy and is now considered more of a headache than a shining example. This shows clearly how much the country needs international assistance in getting back on track with the important matter of Euro-Atlantic integration. Macedonia should, without delay, open accession negotiations with the EU, while negotiating the name dispute with Greece. The issue of the official name of the country should be resolved in parallel with the accession talks. The example of Serbia, where the Kosovo issue was put under Chapter 35, should be considered seriously as an option. Without movement on the path to EU accession, it will be a question of when, and not if, political instability becomes serious, and democracy will continue to backslide. The EU has a moral responsibility to unlock this problem.

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8 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation <http://archive.mid.ru/bdcomp/ns-reuro.nsf/348bd0da1d5a7185432569e700419c7a/44257b100055ec1543257ddf002754d8!OpenDocument> (in Russian).

9 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation <http://archive.mid.ru/bdcomp/ns-reuro.nsf/348bd0da1d5a7185432569e700419c7a/44257b100055ec1543257e2f005942c7!OpenDocument> (in Russian)

About the Author

Andreja Bogdanovski works as a Security Research Fellow at Analytica think tank in Skopje, Macedonia since 2009. He is an author of several studies relating to the democratic governance and reforms of the security sector in Macedonia. Mr. Bogdanovski has completed a Master's degree in International Peace and Security from the Department of War Studies at King's College London. His interests include: international security, security sector reforms, intelligence governance, de-facto states and other.

NUPI

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
C.J. Hambros plass 2D
PO Box 8159 Dep. NO-0033 Oslo, Norway
www.nupi.no | info@nupi.no