

CRIMEAN CRISIS, A CHANCE FOR MACEDONIA?

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As the Ukrainian crisis continues to escalate, the relations between NATO member states and Russia continue to gain difficulties. After the annexation of Crimea, the Russian authorities started massing troops along the Ukrainian border, a step seen as a possible threat for the rest of Ukraine. While on the other hand, tensions are on the rise in the eastern parts of the country as in several towns there are separatist demonstrations expressing disagreement with the new Ukrainian government. What is more, some towns faced escalation of the situation, having protesters holding the government buildings with a vivid presence of armed separatist groups on the ground. This issue is quite worrying especially because it can cause a spillover effect, opening other territorial questions in Europe and beyond. As a result regions such as Western Balkans may face new waves of destabilization.

Nowadays, it can be often heard that the relations between Russia and the West have not been worse since the days of the Cold War. Additionally, the US and the EU have responded with economic sanctions and travel restrictions towards Russian government key figures. On the 2th of April the NATO states foreign ministers have gathered in Brussels to hold their first meeting since Crimea was annexed by Russia. At this meeting the foreign ministers have agreed to suspend all military and civilian cooperation with Russia and

also to take measures considering the security of NATO's eastern members.

Some of the countries in Eastern Europe, besides Ukraine, are considered to be at risk, here primarily including Moldova. The authorities in Chisinau cannot project authority in Transnistria, a region within Moldova's territory with significant Russian speaking population which has claimed independence from Moldova and which security is guaranteed by the Russians who have a military base there. NATO's supreme commander Philip Breedlove stated: "[t] here is absolutely sufficient (Russian) force postured on the eastern border of Ukraine to run to Transnistria if the decision was made to do that, and that is very worrisome". 'However not only these countries but also the Baltic states as well as Poland are feeling unease about their own security. On the aforementioned meeting of the NATO states foreign ministers it was concluded to strengthen NATO's military presence in these eastern European member states. At the moment it is clear that the situation is tense, the relations between NATO and Russia lack reasonable dialog and the Ukrainian crisis is not stabilizing just yet, on the contrary it

1 "NATO says Russia has big force at Ukraine's border, worries over Transdnistria" Reuters, March 23, 2014. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/23/us-ukraine-crisis-nato-idUSBREA2M07O20140323> (accessed 14 April, 2014)

has the potential to escalate further.

Evidently there are some who are continuously calling for acceleration of the NATO's expansion. For instance Senator John McCain has already declared that the integration of Moldova and Georgia into the trans-Atlantic community needs to be accelerated.² This statement is somewhat unrealistic knowing that for the time being there is no consensus among allies for further NATO expansion with this part of Europe. On the other hand there are several aspirant countries for membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures, such as Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia that due to various reasons external and internal have not joined the Alliance yet. On contrary to the Caucasus and Eastern Europe, NATO's open door policy for the Balkans has always been clear. The question is can these countries make use of the situation with the Ukrainian crisis like an asset for gaining membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures?

Currently in the Balkans there are mixed feelings about the Ukrainian crisis, as some of the politicians are supporting the Crimean annexation, while some are opposing it. What is really worrying is that some of these statements coming from politicians from the Balkans are making comparisons between this region and Crimea, inaugurating a risky rhetoric. For instance, Jonuz Musliju from the city council of Bujanovac (South Serbia), has said that same rules should apply for Preshevo and Bujanovac as they do for Crimea, calling for Tirana and Prishtina to unite with Preshevo Valley.³ Milorad Dodik President

2 "McCain Wants Faster NATO Integration Of Georgia, Moldova" Radio Free Europe, March 12, 2014 <http://www.rferl.org/content/georgia-moldova-mccain-na-to/25294893.html> (accessed 14 April, 2014)

3 "Musliju: Za Preševo i Bujanovac isto što i za Krim (Musliu: for Preshevo and Bujanovac, the same as for Crimea) ", Novosti, 18 March, 2014 <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:483213-Musliju-Za-Presevo-i-Bujanovac-isto-sto-i-za-Krim> (accessed 14 April, 2014)

of Republika Srpska supported the annexation and he is known for statements threatening separation of Republika Srpska from the Bosnian Federation.⁴ In a post conflict region such as the Balkans, these messages could potentially lead towards greater divisions and mistrust among communities. Without any doubts the best way for preventing such scenarios is through full integration of the region in the Euro-Atlantic structures.

Macedonia's integration in NATO and EU must be a priority for Macedonia's foreign policy. The country formally initiated its NATO accession path with the Membership Action Plan in 1999, and is actively contributing to the international peace and security through participation in several NATO-led operations. Mainly the contribution is focused on the ISAF mission in Afghanistan with troops on the ground, and formerly in Iraq. Also at the Bucharest summit in 2008 Macedonia's progress and contributions were acknowledged by the member states, but nevertheless Macedonia did not gain membership. Primarily that was a result of the unresolved naming dispute with Greece. The Chicago summit in 2012 was not an enlargement one but it was pointed that further enlargement should take place at the next summit which will be held in September this year in Wales.

Considering the aforementioned about Macedonia's contributions in NATO's work around the world, combined with the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and the possible implications from it, this is probably a good time for Macedonian diplomacy to strengthen its efforts and push further to achieve the goal of finally joining the Alliance. Macedonia should use its full diplomatic and lobbying capacities to avail the ongoing situation, in alliance with the other aspirant countries from the Balkans.

4 "Bosnian Serb Chief Hails Crimea Secession From Ukraine", Balkan Insight, 19 March, 2014 <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/dodik-says-crimea-independence-was-legal-unlike-kosovo-s> (accessed 17 April, 2014)