

## NATO's Waiting-list: the Case of Macedonia

Right after the NATO 2008 Summit in Bucharest, where Macedonia was stymied to join the Alliance, many did not even assume that four years later the country will continue to wait on NATO's doorstep. This time NATO leaders gathered in Chicago from May 20-21 to discuss the transformation of the allied mission in Afghanistan, the increased defense budget cuts and global partnerships. Enlargement (as expected) did not have a high prominence in Chicago. Despite the widespread support from the broader Euro-Atlantic Community, NATO seems to be unwilling to open the door for Macedonia, until the long-standing dispute with Greece is solved.

Taking into consideration that the agenda was announced months ago, keeping Macedonia at the other side of the door was not a surprise. However, remains the fact that it is a surprising precedent for the North-Atlantic community to instate a special condition for admission just because of bilateral matter. Thus, it decreases the credibility of NATO into Macedonian public eye.

The prerequisite for NATO membership is straight forward saying that any European state which commits itself to further the principles of the treaty and fulfill the necessary reforms may join the Alliance. Macedonia did its homework and is constantly contributing to NATO's joint security, being the fifth-biggest per capita contributor, with 177 troops in Afghanistan. Macedonia's steadfast commitment to join NATO is supported by all political parties, ethnic groups and over 90% of the population. Acting like de facto ally, the country has to have the right to feel the benefits from the membership, not only the duties.

Keeping Macedonia outside NATO just because of bilateral grievances could be further incentive for other members to block their rivalries, putting mutual interests in sidelines. So instead of binding the nations and encouraging them to separate individual issues from the common good, the accession process may turn into hostage to arbitrariness of

only one nation. Furthermore, it sends message to the aspirants that all years of preparation and commitments for meeting the alliance's benchmarks are not always enough and even when they come at the end of this long journey and have met all stringent criteria (political, economic, defense, resource, security and legal) nobody guarantees that it will be paid off.

Macedonian ace at the Chicago summit was the decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) which declared that Greece's veto from the Bucharest Summit in 2008 was illegal and it breached an interim agreement brokered by the U.N. in 1995 according to which Greece would not impede Macedonia's membership in international organizations. The ICJ clearly stated that the naming issue cannot be used as a pretext to deny Macedonia membership. But although the international law is in favor of Macedonia, it seems that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is not worried about contravening it. Few hours after the Court pleaded, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen froze the smile of the nation, saying that the decision have no influence on NATO's accession.

Just few weeks before the Chicago Summit, at a Press Conference in Brussels, Rasmussen argued that the key to achieving the ambitious goals of the alliance requires "renewing the bond" between the European and North American Allies based on their membership in an "extended family of values" and "shared determination to confront the most pressing security issues of our age". And what strengthens those bonds more than binding with other nations that share the same values and are committed to one another's collective defense and constantly contribute to transatlantic security. Once Macedonia is integrated into NATO, Greece would share its borders exclusively with NATO member states and it would bring nothing but lasting peace, stability on the Balkans and improvement in their cooperation.

Continued objection to Macedonia's membership in NATO may not wobble regional stability, but it brings frustrations to the Macedonians and makes certain disturbance possible. The country is facing many security challenges and the longer it has to wait, it increases the risk of ambivalence towards

NATO membership. Furthermore, the disappointment among the Macedonian citizens and the government may result with apathy and lack of interest for further efforts. The integration into NATO could help stabilizing the country and the region and would reflect positively on transatlantic security, reinforcing why NATO matters.

The Summit in Chicago is behind us, no miracle had happened and we cannot be angry at anyone for the current situation. Politics does not recognize emotions and irrational decisions made in anger. Macedonia should stay committed to its efforts to find a place under the NATO's umbrella. It has to continue to engage in talks with Greece for agreement that is mutually acceptable. This issue is crucial and fateful for both countries and it needs time for achieving an approximation of the positions. On the other side, Macedonia has to continue with the implementation of the reforms for strengthening its institutions and development of a peaceful, stable and multi-ethnic society. Macedonia's troops will sustain their contribution to peace missions, without caveats, shoulder to shoulder with other soldiers that are coming from the big "NATO family".

When President Obama welcomed Albania and Croatia to NATO in 2009, he said: "This will not be the last time that we have such a celebration, and I look forward to the day when we can welcome Macedonia to the alliance." After all, NATO is not an exclusive club and Macedonia could not be kept outside the alliance forever. The benefits from Macedonian's accession in NATO are obvious, Macedonia needs NATO and NATO needs Macedonia. There is no other alternative.

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