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Long road ahead: Skopje-Brussels, via Athens

LSE Ideas

By Gjorgji Stamov

The Republic of Macedonia pursued a policy of peaceful independence from war-ravaged Yugoslavia in 1991. Considering the devastating outcome of that war, Macedonia's achievement deserves recognition. Secession, however, was not met without problems of its own. Internally, the communist party lost credibility, the economy was collapsing, and relations between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians were in a constant state of tension. Externally, Macedonia's statehood was insecure, challenged by all of its neighbours for variety of reasons. In the circumstances, a policy leading to full Euro-Atlantic integration within the EU and NATO was a logical decision. Unfortunately, the road ahead for Macedonia was a difficult one and even now the situation remains rather unstable.



A long road ahead

The most significant foreign policy challenge Macedonia endured over the last two decades was the diplomatic dispute with Greece over the use of the term 'Macedonia' as an ethno-national and political designation. The official policy of Athens continues to be that 'Macedonia' is irrevocably related to Greek identity, while the government in Skopje claims that the term 'Macedonia' has been 'unilaterally appropriated' by Athens. Consequently, both countries are entrenched in confrontational diplomatic positions toward each other. In an attempt to reflect the harsh realities of power disparity between the two countries, Greece held military exercises near the border with Macedonia in the early 1990s and vetoed all Macedonian applications in international organizations.

Unable to break the Macedonian position by intimidation and diplomatic pressure Athens imposed a unilateral economic embargo from 1994 to 1996. The government in Skopje was unable to match the 'hard tools' of Greek foreign policy. However, it compensated on some 'soft' issues that irritated Athens – in 1991 the Macedonian parliament accepted the 16-star of Virginia as an official symbol, one closely associated with the ancient Macedonian kingdom and Alexander the Great. In many ways, the situation was paradoxical: Athens expressed its fear of a country one-fifth the size of Greece in terms of population and territory, and even smaller in military terms and national wealth. Macedonia on the other hand failed to establish a working relationship with the Balkan power house and pursued policies of petty provocation and unnecessary aggravation. Therefore, it seems safe to conclude that the two countries had failed develop a common ground for mutual trust and cooperation from the very beginning.

By the mid-1990s, both NATO and the EU were focusing on consolidating Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, and ending the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia. The Macedonian-Greek dispute, highly emotional in theory but bloodless in reality, was not an urgent concern. The issue was addressed in the United Nations, where the country received international recognition under the temporary name "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM). In 1996, a compromise between the two countries was reached: Macedonia agreed to give up its national 16-star flag, in exchange for a Greek promise that Athens would lift the embargo and stop blocking Skopje's integration to the Euro-Atlantic structures in the future. The diplomatic thaw between the two countries soon yielded positive results. In 2001, Macedonia signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU, the first state from the Western Balkans to do so. The SAA gave Macedonia a clear vision of its EU prospects. The road toward NATO seemed open as well when Macedonia joined the 'Adriatic Group' with Albania and Croatia in order to facilitate more rapid NATO integration. Greece did not protest, although it consistently maintained that the dispute between the two countries needed to be resolved before final accession.

Foreign policies are also shaped by domestic political developments and Macedonia's foreign policy is not exception. Between 1992 and 1998 the country was led by the Social-Democratic Alliance for Macedonia (SDAM). Pressed by internal socio-economic problems, the SDAM maintained a policy of dialogue with the EU and NATO, without any particular success. In 1998, the SDAM was defeated by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Party-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (IMRP-DPMNU). In 2001, Macedonia's ethnic Albanian minority initiated an armed rebellion against Macedonian authorities; it ended with a political settlement, facilitated by the EU/US duo, known as the Ohrid Frame Agreement (OFA). In 2002, IMRP-DPMNU lost the elections to SDAM on account of widespread corruption and abysmal economic performance. However, IMRP lost no time and quickly reorganized. Nikola Gruevski, a young and ambitious politician, managed to emerge victorious, offering an agenda for reforms that captured public attention. In 2006, SDAM lost to IMRP-DPMNU and has maintained its position in the opposition ever since. The 2006 election marked the beginning of new era in the Macedonian foreign policy.

One of the key projects Gruevski pursued was a policy of re-inventing Macedonian national identity, a policy that was to have significant impact on Macedonia's foreign policy. Gruevski deviated from the idea the Macedonia's nation Slav origin supporting instead those who claimed Ancient Macedonian roots. The most logical assumption is that Gruevski's intention was to 'up the ante' in the dispute with Greece, forcing officials in Athens to make concessions, or even give up the issue completely. That would have been a major political victory for him, both at home and abroad. Naturally, Athens contested these aspirations and deemed Gruevski's policies unacceptable for Greece.

The diplomatic confrontation between the two countries culminated during the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest. Led by American tutorship, the 'Adriatic Group' of countries was about to receive an invitation to join the Alliance. But Greece refused to endorse the Macedonian accession to NATO and the opportunity for membership was lost. Today, it is evident that Gruevski failed to anticipate two developments. First, Macedonia overlooked the fact that Greece, as full member of the EU and NATO, has the right of veto on all decisions made within these two organizations, giving Greece a sense of security in the decision to deny Macedonia entry into the Alliance. Second, Macedonia overestimated the American ability to impose its will over Greece. The Bush administration pursued a policy of closeness with Macedonia because the small Balkan state was part of the 'Coalition of the Willing' in the war on terror in Iraq. Its military contribution was small, but for the United States the gesture spoke volumes. Greece opted out of the Iraqi campaign, casting a chill on the relations between Athens and Washington. For Macedonia, the reward from Washington came in 2004 when the US recognized the country under its constitutional name. It was a major boost for the Macedonian position in the dispute with Greece.

Closer analysis further reveals that Gruevski's government made another crucial oversight in the current state of affairs on the international scene. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw pact, the Alliance has been suffering from a 'lost cause' syndrome, and from lack of internal unity and cohesion. The dissolution of the NATO is not a desirable outcome for its members, and all steps that might lead to such an outcome are to be avoided at all cost. In the context of Macedonia, the US was unwilling to risk NATO's stability by pushing for Macedonian membership in the Alliance.

In the end, the Bucharest decision had a multi-directional effect on the region. First, the Macedonian government was bitter that despite meeting all requisite standards, the country was left out of the Euro-Atlantic loop. Second, Greece achieved a victory of national importance, but it also tainted its image of as a regional leader for the future. Last the EU and the NATO had to shelve indefinitely one of the most successful policy stories for Brussels in the Balkans. The EU learned from the Bucharest lesson, realizing that all talks for further Macedonian integration is meaningless, unless the name issue is resolved. Greece would most likely not budge until Macedonia makes serious political concessions. For now, both organizations are forced to maintain an illusion that they are in control of the issue. The only possible solution is a compromise between Skopje and Athens, which, for lack of prior solid foundations, would be a political novelty. Whatever success was achieved in 1996 was abandoned between 2006 and 2008. At present, the dispute is hibernating under a thin layer of ice and it is unclear when that might change, but what remains a reality is that the road for Skopje's road to Brussels will have to run through Athens.

Gjorgji Stamov works as a university research assistant at the Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto.

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